A New World, Book 3

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The third Lunar War has begun. Plans sent into motion centuries ago are about to reach their conclusion. And the fate of the world, and of two young women, will soon be decided.

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Chapter 1

"King's pawn to E5"

Kanako could barely keep herself from growling in frustration as she placed the markers on the sandy makeshift terrain map of Gensoukyo's new environs. It was idiocy. Pure idiocy. On both sides of the battlefield.

Her head snapped up as she heard the door open. But it was only Suwako. A pity. She'd been hopeing for a tengu so she could yell at them.

"Sanae's asleep," Suwako said quietly. Kanako nodded her approval. Their current wind priestess, named after her ancestor, was far too young to be involved in this war. The very fact that Suwako's sleep suggestion had worked proved that.

Kanako looked down at the board again. The Lunarians' main rabbit army seemed to be surrounding Eientei, while their other deployments seemed to be haphazard. They'd set up a command post in the small section of hills between where the two forests met, and there was another group heading towards the Scarlet Devil Mansion. Kanako couldn't make heads or tails of their movements past that. It was utterly ridiculous. A concentrated effort by any force outside of Eientei could sweep the whole Lunarian army.

Sadly, no one seemed to be taking advantage of that weakness. As a military commander this annoyed Kanako to no end.

Suwako moved to the opposite end of the map and looked down. "I don't know why you're focusing so much on this. If we go out there the Lunarians will banish us back here within minutes. Gods aren't allowed to interfere unless their worshipers ask them to."

"And our worshipers are arrogant youkai who barely have the ability to ask for a cup of sugar, much less for help in a fight," Kanako finished bitterly. She snorted and looked up. "Still I know of a way around this. But I can't do it."

Suwako looked surprised, then smirked at her. "Another thing you can't do Kanako? How'd you handle being a god without me around?"

Kanako laughed. "I can't go because I'm not an native god. You know you don't have to follow as many rules as I do Suwako." Suwako shrugged and smiled. "Besides you aren't going to be fighting anyway."

Kanako pointed at the nearest Lunarian in Kappa territory. "I think it's time the Lunarians learned why the Mishaguji were sealed."

Suwako's smile faded in shock. "Wait you want me to let those loose? You know they aren't easy to control right? It takes a lot of effort. Especially if they're in a real fight."

"Don't free them all. Just a few to attack the Lunarians. They should beat each other up and you can finish off the winner. Treat it as a short range guided attack," Kanako said. "If you do this right and clear out the kappa territory you might be able to get a band of fighters together to start the counter attack."

Sawako looked down at the map again. "Hm… Might be possible. I won't be in much danger either way, and it'll cause disruption even if it fails. But what will you be doing while I do all the work?"

Kanako looked down at the single marker advancing towards the Great Tengu's lodge. "I think there might be a few people who have faith in us and who aren't too stubborn to call."

Suwako looked at Kanako questioningly, but the war god held her peace. She knew better then to rely entirely on one person.

Suwako finally shrugged and started towards the door. "Well if I'm going to summon those curse gods for real I'd better have the stuff I need to seal them back on hand. I'll keep you informed Kanako."

"Thanks Suwako," Kanako replied.

When the elder goddess was gone, Kanako carefully removed her helmet from its resting place and put it on. It still fit as perfectly as it did when it was first altered for her. She was glad she'd insisted on keeping her hair short, to better wear it.

She briefly stretched to shift the weight of her armor to all the proper spots, then sat down again and began to meditate.

There were some that might call upon her. And when they did…

The Lunarians would learn the price for ruining the nation she had helped build.

The waiting had become interminable to Maribel.

The four had been staying in Mayohiga, sleeping during the day, and alternating between practice and resting at night. Fortunately Renko had learned a spell to help reset their internal clocks, so the sudden shift in sleep patterns wouldn't make them groggy.

Which meant Mary had only had to deal with the constant gnawing in her stomach as her mind flip flopped between her sorrow over the loss of her family, and her fear of battle.

Currently she was trying to read a book to keep her mind off things. It was some fairy tale about a blue dove and a princess. She couldn't say how it ended, because she'd been rereading the same page over and over again. But it was better then thinking about reality.

Ran was doing math problems. Renko had wandered over to see what the kitsune was solving, but quickly retreated when she saw the

variables in play. The fox hadn't been joking about her mathematical skill.

After that Renko had gone back to pouring over her spellbooks. Occasionally she'd do some basic astronomy, or polish the hakkero with a sense of wonder. But mostly, Renko went over her books like a grad student studying for their Masters tests.

Chen just napped. Apparently nekomata kept a lot of cat traits. Maribel felt a little jealous, but it was still calming to see the childish figure curled up in a ball sleeping.

She tried once again to get back to her reading. She'd gotten to the part about how the demon of the north sea was struck down…

Maribel froze when she felt the air suddenly change. Somehow she knew. "They're here."

Ran looked up from her equations and scowled. "You're right. It's time to go. Chen!"

The nekomata looked like she was going to argue with her master for a moment, then she rubbed against the three before running out into Gensoukyo proper. "Be careful!" she cried as she left.

"You too," Renko and Maribel called after her. Ran simply closed her eyes and sent something mentally. Then the fox woman looked over at them.

"Are you ready?" she said simply.

Maribel nodded. She didn't need to bring weapons.

Beside her Renko slipped the mini-hakkero under her hat and nodded. With the magical reactor she could cast all her spells without needing a wand or potion to work with, despite not being a youkai magician.

Ran nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

Maribel allowed Ran to make the portal, even though the kitsune's false boundary manipulation was starting to look inefficient to her. The three stepped through, into a forest clearing resounding with frog croaks and insect sounds. Maribel looked around to gather her bearings.

"Should we really be out in the open like this?" she asked.

"Yeah, it seems like we shouldn't give up cover so easily," Renko said.

Ran nodded. "Anyone who's a threat to me won't be stopped by trees. And hiding in the forest would allow us to be separated and ambushed. Our enemy knows where we are. Let's force him to come to us."

The butterflies returned to Maribel's stomach. "So we wait?"

"Yes. Just a little longer…" Ran said with a dark smile. "Then we get our revenge."

The butterflies faded away as heat rose in her body. "Right." Maribel looked out at the forest.

It was time to make the Lunarians pay.

Lord Tenshou frowned as his first steps on earth were greeted by a hungry mosquito. Fortunately his wards activated and incinerated the insect before the unclean thing could bite him, but it was still insulting.

As he looked around his main transport site his mood improved. Everyone had made it there via the teleportation devices, and the youkai hunters were spreading out already. In fact by the time he finished his inspection only his personal guard was left.

He stood there for a few more moments before realizing Jiyuwan wasn't present, and thus he'd have to ask for a report. Silently he cursed the old warrior's strange sense of honor. It was a waste forcing the swordsman to try to kill the entire tengu nation, but the man had questioned every single move Lord Tenshou had made. And at some point that questioning would become evident, destroying Lord Tenshou's entire political base.

Still there were others who still served him. And unlike Jiyuwan they were still loyal to him instead of some fantasy idea of personal honor. Sadly none were quite as skilled, but they would do fine.

"Lady Nashina, how is the assault progressing?" he asked.

The silver haired woman turned away from the machinery she'd been fiddling with and bowed to him. "All goes according to your plans my Lord. We've encountered no resistance so far, though I imagine our strikes at the youkai strongholds will soon change that."

He nodded appreciatively to her. "Has there been any sign of movement from the tengu or the Yakumo?"

"No my Lord. But it's still early." Nashina looked like she was about to say something more, then bit her lip.

Lord Tenshou looked around. Seeing everyone nearby was either totally loyal to his scheme or occupied he motioned to the woman. "You have a question. Please ask. I would not wish my most important ally to be distracted by personal worries."

Nashina blinked in surprise then sighed. "Thank you my lord." She lowered her voice so that no one could overhear. "Lord Tenshou, you said that the Yakumo was behind all this, but she's dead. I was there when we killed her, and we made sure her soul was taken away. I can understand some of her power leaking out, but to actually return, whole in body and soul…" She shook her head. "Even ignoring the fact that such an act would destroy her reincarnation's soul, how is it even possible?"

He bristled at the question at first, but he rapidly calmed himself. Nashina was simply seeking guidance, not questioning his judgment.

Lord Tenshou placed his hand on the woman's shoulder. "It confused me as well, when my powers first revealed I would be fighting the Yakumo again. But I'm certain now. Think about it. Her power was so immense you had to spend the entire incident keeping her in check, even after she was dead."

"No I am quite certain. Yukari Yakumo will return to life here, at this very spot." Lord Tenshou allowed himself to smile grimly. "And here I will have the joy of killing her again. It is, inevitable. Even if none of my other plans succeed, Yukari Yakumo will die on this, the night of her rebirth."

The dragon twitched.

His prey was interested in something below now. Interested, but not totally engrossed in it.

It was not yet the time to strike.

But that time would be soon.

Oisha moved through the field carefully. The crisp air of Autumn had caused the flowers here to wilt and the grass to die, but it was still fairly high here out in the rolling fields where no villager would dare go harvest. Almost anything could be hiding in the grass.

In fact a lot of things were hiding in that grass. The constant noise of crickets, mice and other small creatures assaulted her ears. The earth truly was a hectic and dirty place. She was half tempted to just set the field ablaze to shut the noise up, but that would draw too many attackers to her at once. Just because she was one of the best fighters of the moon didn't mean she was invincible. She was certain

no youkai was her equal in magic, but forty or fifty youkai might end up getting a lucky shot in.

Of course right now there was no sign of any of those youkai. She had been certain that a lone human wandering around would get swarmed by the bloodthirsty monsters but so far all she'd seen was-

"Urashimeya~!"

Oisha shrieked as a purple thing leaped out at her from the bushes! As she leaped back she tossed a energy blast at the creature purely out of reflex. The blindingly bright energy bolt whined across the space before hitting the creature with a meaty smack.

It let out a strangely high pitched scream as the blast sent it backwards.

Oisha stood there for a moment as surprise, then embarrassment washed over her. Here she was thinking herself to be a great magical warrior, and some random youkai had managed to sneak up on her. She resolved to be more careful before flying over to she what she'd killed.

The youkai looked nothing like what she'd expected. It was humanoid. Some might even say it was cute, though the blood ruined that a bit. Even more surprisingly it was alive. The feminine figure in purple and blue whimpered as Oisha approached it. When it tried to hide an ugly umbrella from her she realized it must be a karakasa.

"Well," she muttered to herself, "not an impressive first kill, but it's best to finish it off." The youkai's mismatched eyes grew wider at that, and it began trying to crawl away, sobbing as it's movements disturbed the wound on it's stomach. Oisha raised her hands to finish the matter.

There was a sickening crack and pain ripped through her body. Her mind realized she had been sent flying mere seconds before she

crashed into the ground. This time however the shield devices did their job and the impact was muted. She held out an arm to stop the rolling, allowing her magical and technological wards to soak the energy. Then she jumped to her feet, ignoring the pain in her side.

Standing about thirty feet away (she'd been launched that far!) was another youkai. It was also in the form of a human female carrying an umbrella, but this one had green hair, and a red checkered dress and vest. The youkai was smiling, standing in the field as if it owned the place.

"You Lunarians are very rude. First you wake me from my nap, then you break my umbrella." The youkai held up the bent item before casting it aside. "I think I'll have to kill you a bit for that."

Oisha was about to snap something back in response, when the creature looked her in the eyes. The youkai's dark green eyes radiated power. Pure unadulterated power. And a crushing sense of history.

For the first time in her long long life, Oisha felt humbled by another's age.

She snapped out of it the moment the youkai raised its hand and began summoning its attack. "I see you aren't small fry. Unfortunately for you no impure being can match the power of a Lunarian!" She began calling up her own spell.

"Hmph. Big words for a human," the youkai said. "Know that Kazami Yuuka is the one who will take your life this day." The youkai's spell completed and Oisha was blinded and deafened as an explosion of Rainbow light raced towards her. "Master Spark!"

The lunarian tossed up her hands and a black and grey tear in space appeared to shield her. "Dimensional Rift!"

The earth trembled as the two spells clashed.

This is, unsurprisingly, a continuation of the New World Series, and the final installment in the set. I encourage readers to start with the first 'book' in the series. I've finally got enough together of this one to feel safe posting it, so don't worry about long delays. I hope you all enjoy the conclusion.

Chapter 2

You may be obliged to wage war, but not to use poison arrows.

Huian bowed to the shivering rabbit. "This was Miss Koakuma's room before she got married. It has all the amenities, and I've left food for the rest of the day. By then the locks should have faded. Do you need anything else?"

Flopsy shook her head. "N~no, I'll be fine."

Huian simply smiled and nodded. Acting like the other girl wasn't scared out of her mind was probably the best way of handling her. "If you're feeling cold there should be a cardigan next to the bed, and the tea should be hot. I'll come get you out as soon as the battle is over so you can get your ears regenerated and return to your training."

The gatekeeper paused a second to see if the rabbit girl had anything more to say before the door was shut, but the moon rabbit just bowed. "Um, thank you, Huian."

"Don't mention it," Huian said as she shut the door. The magical wards clicked into place and she felt the space between the door and the rest of the mansion become nearly infinite. She then called upon her personal powers and stepped to the main library.

"Ah, please don't disturb the circles," Patchouli said idly as she finished another chalk line.

Huian started slightly, then remembered to float to avoid scuffing any of the patterns. Fortunately she hadn't appeared on top of any lines.

She then turned to report to her mistress. "I've put Flopsy to bed. The mansion is ready Lady Flandre."

Flandre briefly turned towards her to nod her approval. The vampire's cold stare caused Huian to sweat a little. As battle approached Flandre's childishness seemed to have faded. Her bloodlust was starting to take precedence. And everyone who was sane kept their distance during those times.

Huian turned her attention to the crystal ball floating between the residents of the mansion. "Have we seen any invaders Mistress?"

"No," Flandre said shortly.

Marisa shrugged. "There's a light show going on over where Yuka occasionally lives, but beyond that nothing so far. It seems everyone who knew this was coming is playing defensively."

Juri shifted next to her mistress. "We saw a group come down near the mansion, but they haven't shown themselves. I wonder why?"

Koakuma shook her head. "Um, my question is why can we still see the village? Shouldn't Keine have hidden it?"

"Something's gone wrong," Alice said darkly.

"Ah, I have it." Dinah tapped the ball and the viewpoint shifted. Now some red outlines could be seen standing just inside the treeline next to the mansion. "There they are. But they're waiting. Are they trying to lure us into a trap?"

Patchouli coughed as she floated up to join everyone else. "I can only hope so. Fighting them in a forest would be almost as advantageous as fighting them in the basement. Better that then some other trick."

"But how are they planning to lure us out?" Alice asked as she peered into the scrying orb.

As if to answer the question a plume of fire came up from the distant village. Huian grimaced. "That's not Mokou."

"The shrine!"

At Marisa's cry, everyone looked towards where the shrine should be in the scrying orb. The hill where the ancient building stood was now topped in flame.

Marisa reached out and summoned her broomstick "I need to…"

"Go," Flandre said with a wave of her hand. "Head out the back."

Koakuma nodded. "We'll just trigger the contingency plan early if we need to."

"I'm going too. We'll need the Grimoire to get back," Alice said.

"Be careful out there," Patchouli said, quickly kissing the two. Koakuma followed suit.

Marisa jumped on her broomstick. "Take care."

Then they were off.

Huian turned to Dinah. "It's time to create the maze. The people waiting outside probably won't be heading after Alice and Marisa after they realize those two got past them."

The demon magician smiled in return. "Right." She then placed her hands over Huian's eyes. As darkness enveloped the gatekeeper she relaxed.

Huian had inherited some magical power from Sakuya, in addition to all her other gifts. She'd never gotten around to mastering it, but it was there in her blood, just as much as her chi abilities and her power to manipulate space. She just couldn't access it well.

Dinah's succubus blood however allowed her to manipulate the magical powers of others. And her magical knowledge allowed her to use the power of others in very complex ways.

As Dinah's spell flowed through Huian's body she could feel the basement corridors twisting and bending. Soon it was a massive tangle. A maze that was bound to her will and power.

Dinah pulled her hands away and Huian opened her eyes. "It's ready Mistress."

Patchouli nodded. "Good work."

Huian's blood froze as Flandre giggled, "Are the rest of the preparations ready Juri?"

"Yes Mistress," the maid replied.

The vampire reached out her hand as if she was grasping an orb. "Then let's play."

Mystia's wings twitched involuntarily.

She probably shouldn't be so close to the village, but honestly she wasn't looking for a fight, and the village was the safest place to be close to. When Keine hid the village's history, Keine and Mokou would be the only two still around. Two dangerously powerful beings alone in a massive clearing. Mokou and Keine would draw far more attention then a lone night sparrow.

At least that's how it should have gone.

Mystia was there, she could tell Keine was there, but the village wasn't concealed.

It was burning.

At least sections were. At the north end there was a small flare. Mokou was likely fighting someone. Still the immortal obviously was holding back, since there still was a northern village.

Near her the fight was more intense. And the fire wielder was not holding back.

Mystia shuddered as another explosion ripped through a mansion, sending burning planks across the houses. Then her eyes opened in shock as one of Keine's spells tore through the same area. If the Hakutaku was using those kind of spells in the village she obviously believed that there was nothing she could do that would be less damaging then letting her opponent live. Given how much the Hakutaku loved the village…

The sight of a figure running away from the village towards her drew her attention away from the flickering light of the spell battle. She tensed momentarily before seeing it was a young boy.

She gritted her teeth. A lone boy would have no chance out in the forests at night. She knew a lot of youkai weren't going to be picky about which humans they attacked now that an invasion was on. Most probably still didn't even know an invasion was on.

It wasn't her problem. She was a human eating youkai.

It shouldn't be her problem.

Cursing herself silently she flew towards the boy, making sure to stay near the ground. The child had been looking over his shoulder most of the time so when he finally noticed Mystia swooping towards him she was fairly close. He shrieked and fell to the floor, then rose to his knees when he recognized her. "Ms Lorelei?"

"Idiot kid, don't run to the forest. Run to the farms," she hissed. The boy just stared at her stupidly. She sighed. "Where's your family?"

"I… I don't know. We were running, and then a building collapsed and separated us. Daddy told me to keep running out of the village…"

Mystia nodded. "Then check the West gate. That's the closest one. And tell everyone to hide in the farms! There's no youkai or Lunarians there." The boy just sat there looking at her in shock so she waved her arms at him. "Get going!" she chirped.

As the boy ran off she looked back at the village. She wondered if his family would actually make it out. She wouldn't really be sad if those old ladies that had tossed fried beans at her went up in smoke. Or any of the perverts that had grabbed her ass. But she remembered that kid's family being nice customers. The daughter had always played with the pinwheels and the father always complimented her on her special sauce.

Keine and her opponent took to the skies then for a brief moment. Mystia looked at the Lunarian in the light of the full moon.

The woman was obviously strong. Quite strong.

But there was no holy power about her. Nothing in her face that made her seem any different from all the other human magicians that had gone on a rampage in the village because of some slight or another.

Mystia's heart began to quicken again. Not with fear, but with excitement.

She knew it was partly the villager's belief. The repeated stories of a 'youkai of justice' were calling to her. She realized not all of the building feelings in her heart was the desire to hunt that was inborn to all true youkai.

But that was okay. In the end, all that mattered was that she was a youkai, born to terrorize humans.

That others thought it was justice instead of petty desire was their own foolishness.

Keine coughed as the smoke burned her lungs. Her muscles ached and strained as she lifted the wall and threw it in front of her. "Get out of here!" she yelled to the human family huddling behind her.

The wooden wall shuddered and cracked as her enemy's magic crashed into it. Keine's hand flashed out and slapped aside one of the splinters before it could strike her face. The other shards of wood struck her, but couldn't penetrate her skin.

The sound of the family behind her moving helped her keep her focus. She charged forward hoping to catch her foe off guard with her horns.

She'd made it thirty feet before an explosion scorched her front. She rapidly exhaled to keep the flames from searing her lungs, then cried out as the back blast sent her rolling into a flaming support beam.

'Dammit, Mokou, where are you?' one part of her screamed. But she knew Mokou had to be fighting elsewhere. Nothing else would keep the immortal from her side.

She shook off the impact and stood again, growling as the smug woman who'd started randomly attacking the village floated before her. Keine tried once again to hide the village's history, but her powers failed yet again.

Frustrated and hurt she yelled at the woman, "What have the villagers done to you! How can you call this righteousness?"

The infuriating Lunarian just shrugged. "They're impure. But I don't kill them because I hate them. I'm killing them because you're wasting your energy protecting them. And because the rest of you 'guardians' will flock here to save the humans after I finish you off."

Keine's innards seemed to burn with rage. The heat within her was almost as great as the heat out here. The bitch had killed at least five villagers already just to make her angry!

The Were-hakutaku stared at the Lunarian in hatred. "I didn't want to have to use this, but you've forced my hand."

Keine reached out letting her mind adapt to her powers. Time stood still as years flickered backwards. Days flowed quickly into years then decades. She saw the woman's training and days of leisure on the moon, centuries and centuries of idleness. Then a long childhood, where she wanted for nothing. Then her birth.

And at that moment in history Keine reached out and twisted it. "It's time you never existed!"

Keine's bold proclamation was met with a moment of silence, then a laugh from the woman. The heat in Keine's body fled her. Her powers had failed again! How?

The woman gave her a mocking smile. "Allow me to tell you my power. I can bind things. I've bound this village to the land, and I've bound my history to reality. Your powers are worthless against me."

The woman rose a little further into the air, preparing the spell that would probably kill Keine. As she did Keine saw her. A figure she'd never expected to see in the battle.

Mystia opened her mouth and began to sing a song of hunting.

"What!" the woman screamed as she looked into the sky, the night blindness already clouding her eyes. "Another youkai? Where are you?"

Keine watched in awe as Mystia raised her voice as she glided further into the air so she could swoop down. A youkai on the hunt, as in days long past.

Alice sped towards the shrine, following Marisa. They were pushing the limits of their flying speed, fighting against the wind. Alice's vision could barely make out the trees before they passed them.

Fortunately the two of them knew the path to the shrine almost by heart. They'd flown and fought here for over 300 years.

Which is why neither of them hit anything when a series of bullets from the ground forced them to dodge out of the way.

As soon as she sensed the foreign magic, Alice rolled left and spun in a circle, sending two suicide dolls towards where their attacker was. Marisa finished her roll to the right and added her own magical napalm mix to the attack.

The trees below burst into flames with a boom. Alice winced at the sudden light shift, but forced her eyes to stay open even as they teared up.

Two figures escaped from the explosions; one male, one female, magical shields glowing brightly. Before she'd even consciously confirmed they were Lunarians, Alice's dolls began firing at them. The pair split in response, the man drawing a sword and lunging for her, while the woman unleashed a barrage of lasers against Marisa.

Alice sent another three dolls out in front of her with a flick of her wrist. She didn't have a clue how to fight with a sword, but the dolls knew on some level. She felt a brief pang of loss as the man cut the first doll down but the doll's 'sisters' avenged her, sending the man on the defensive with their perfectly coordinated cuts. He fell back to get room for a counter attack, but another flick of the wrist sent five dolls wielding lances charging into the fray.

Trusting that her lovely creations had her foe occupied, Alice turned to check on Marisa.

As Alice watched Marisa executed one of her standard reckless charges, spinning through her opponent's laser field, while somehow avoiding the deadly beams. As she did Marisa released two lasers of her own, but the focused light seemed to curve away from her target. Alice felt her worry grow. Obviously the woman knew how to bend light away from her. That took out a lot of Marisa's normal arsenal.

The sudden feeling emptiness that accompanied her sword dolls dying forced Alice to return her attention to her own opponent. He had dodged the lancer dolls and was making his way back towards her. She swore softly and allowed two more suicide dolls to attack the man, while rearranging her shooting dolls to provide a blistering crossfire.

Alice hated fighting like this. She loved her dolls, even those built only to self destruct, and a battle like this chewed through them far too quickly. She couldn't even be proud of the results her dolls gave. There was no beauty in her attacks, nor glory in the outcome. There would just be a shattered body and a pile of broken dolls. Nothing more.

She took a good look at her foe, and anger spread through her heart. The only thing she could depend on was that her enemies were scum. She didn't have the same connection Marisa did to the shrine, but she respected the Hakurei family. They were going to make the Lunarians pay for involving the Hakurei in this mess.

She felt the magic in the area swirl around her foe as he started a spell, and sent her dolls in a corkscrew attack pattern with a vicious pull on her strings. He broke the spell to escape the attack and retreated again, still keeping himself between her and the burning shrine.

"You heartless bitch! Dragon Meteor!"

Alice jumped backwards as Marisa's scream ripped through the air. The world turned white and a sound somewhere between a whine and a roar drowned out everything else. The shockwave sent her tumbling through the air, like a drunk in an earthquake.

When she could control her movements again she flew back up to where her wife was sitting and snarling at the two Lunarians. Alice watched them take up defensive positions again.

Alice took a deep breath and tried to think about the fight calmly. Trying to power through was Marisa's thing. She was supposed to be tactical. What were the Lanarians doing, and how could she stop them?

'They're stalling for time. They must expect reinforcements if they hold long enough,' Alice realized.

Alice grabbed Marisa's shoulders. "I'll finish up here. You go ahead."

"But," Marisa looked at her with shocked eyes. "There's no way you can…"

Marisa's eye's opened even wider when Alice flipped open her grimoire. "It's time I taught these Lunarians why transformed Magicians are the most powerful youkai in existence."

Marisa nodded. "I'll be back for you as soon as I'm done." Alice's heart was warmed by the confidence in Marisa's statement.

The Lunarian woman threw a spell at Alice, possibly out of pique for being ignored. Alice of course dodged it casually. The man simply said, "As much as I'd love to punish you for your arrogance neither of you can get past us."

Marisa laughed darkly and pulled the brim of her hat up. "Challenge accepted." Alice started as Marisa pecked her on the cheek, then flipped her broom around to point in the opposite direction of the shrine. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Marisa whispered two words, "Gateless Gate," then accelerated on her broom.

The two Lunarians blinked as Marisa seemed to run away, then vanished. The man tried a teleport trace, but got nothing. Which made sense. After all Marisa hadn't teleported. Technically.

Alice smirked at the two. Then she closed her eyes and called to her Grimoire.

She felt the power reach out to her. The power within the book that had been bottled up for such a long time. A power infused with a thousand myths and legends from all of history.

It came slowly at first, like a stream at the start of spring, as the first thaw touched it. At first it crept along, finding old channels overgrown, and new channels awaiting its touch. Soon though the power started overflowing, as the barriers Alice had put up broke down one after the other. The book once again was free to suffuse her being with its magic, a river of power that surged throughout her soul like a second pulse.

She opened her eyes and flung out her hand on instinct. She cried out the words of the Thunders, and the magical blast her opponents had been forming while she'd been summoning her power shattered into a thousand motes of light, its magic unmade. The two figures below her stared up at her in awe of her prowess, and she reveled in their shock and terror.

She rapidly forced that feeling down though. Logically, Alice knew her advantage wasn't that great. She'd devoted most of her spells to non combat practices, and her combat spells mostly focused on her dolls. She only had a few spells that allowed her to attack directly, and most of those were easy to dodge.

With one exception.

Her foes of course weren't going to let her summon up that magic unopposed. The woman lowered her head and began a low chant. Electricity poured out of her hands and infused the man's blade, turning it into a crackling weapon of energy that would shatter most magical shields. Alice needed to buy some time.

She out a small doll and tossed it forward to meet her foes. "Semi Autonomous Goliath Doll."

The doll began expanding the moment it left her hand. It rapidly grew to twice the man's height and brought it's blades clashing down in defiance. The electrified blade climbed to meet the mighty blow and the forest was wracked with the shriek of arcing lightning as the three blades locked against each other.

Still, Alice knew that wouldn't be enough. It was only out there to buy Alice time.

Most people believed that Magician youkai have no unique traits. Sure they all know magic, but that's something any youkai (and many humans) can learn given enough time.

This is wrong.

Each magician youkai has one spell that no other living being, not even other magicians, can duplicate. One spell that defines them. The spell that made them a youkai or removed their aging.

Patchouli had her Philosophers Stone, which could alter the very nature of souls. Marisa had created her Improbability Potion, which defied conventional logic. Byakuren had her 'Superhuman Byakuren' spell, which gave her powers far beyond mortal humans.

And Alice had her grimoire. The Grimoire of Alice. A book for her alone. A book that declared she was to be a legend.

Alice called upon the artifact that had made her a youkai once again, asking it for more power. And it gladly answered, making the river of power overflow. Alice fought back the urge to laugh as raw energy coursed through her veins, and poured out of her eyes. She instead forced herself to focus on her spell.

The Goliath doll was missing an arm, but it was still holding her foes off. They'd seen her begin her spell and were rushing to stop her. But it was too late.

"The sun shines on the battlefield

It shines with furious might

It does its best to shadows clear

To make the future bright.

And this is odd, because it is

The middle of the night."

A blast of flame shot up from her grimoire, as bright as the sun in her improvised poem. Alice smiled even as the Goliath doll collapsed and continued her rhyme.

"The time has come, my foolish foes,

To talk of many things

Of wonder - worlds - and walruses

Of dolls - and of their strings.

And if this world is really real,

And what makes humans beings."

The book pulsed with energy and shot another bolt into the flame sitting above them. The ball of fire dropped down from the sky and exploded in a crimson wave. It washed over Alice, but she felt no heat, only a sudden weakness. The power that had flowed through her body was gone. All drained into that massive explosion.

And when it faded her enemies were gone as well.

After a few seconds the creatures of the forest decided the night's entertainment was over and began their cries again. The sounds of the crickets was proof of Alice's victory.

Alice sighed deeply and allowed herself to drift down to the ground. Her body ached all over, and the book felt like lead in her hands. Overcharging herself with the grimoire like that always left her weakened. She probably wouldn't be able to fight for the rest of the night.

Still, she'd taken out two of the Lunarians, and Marisa was still fresh. Alice would just have to have faith in her friends and wait the rest of the battle out.

When she reached the ground she took cover between two bushes next to a young tree that still had some leaves. To pass the time she flipped open her grimoire again.

There on the pages, in a script only she could read, a new story was forming. A story of two soldiers thrown in a strange world from a harsh battle.

As she watched them begin exploring their new world she wondered if they'd embrace their new existence as part of the book, or become a well placed pile of bones for the next 'Alice' to find.

She was hoping for a pile of bones herself. But maybe they'd mature enough for her to change her mind.

The heat from the flames made the air heavy in her lungs. Hitomi found herself desperately trying to gasp in air, and wincing at the pain each time she did. But still she managed to throw the dozen iron needles she had in her left hand with pinpoint accuracy.

The crimson haired woman who'd been attacking her however simply dodged to the side. Hitomi forced herself to fly up more and whisper a prayer through parched lips. Seven homing amulets flew out of her hands and arced towards the woman.

And once again, Hitomi was forced to watch as the woman simply waved her hands and dispelled the magic from the slips, turning

them into simple paper again. The charms floated into the fire and were consumed.

"It won't work you know," the woman said in a painfully polite tone. "My power is to cancel out spiritual powers. None of your prayers, charms or summons will work against me."

Hitomi felt sick. She'd already figured out that from the fight, but she couldn't seem to do a thing about it. Summoned gods had been quickly dispelled, her needles couldn't catch the woman, and barriers only delayed the inevitable. She was out of normal options. All she could think to do was stall until she could think of something better to do.

"If you can dispel anything I create why bother with this shrine? We don't have anything to do with you or the youkai! Leave us in peace."

The woman shook her head. "You and I both know what a lie that is. Besides, my lord is afraid you might recreate the barrier to hide away from us. Which means my orders are clear. I'm to exterminate the Hakurei line."

Hitomi felt fear spike through her. *Kanon!* Then the crackle of the burning shrine almost brought a smile to her face. Kanon would have fled already. Win or lose her daughter should be safe.

Now she just needed to find a way to make sure her daughter still had a mother around after this mess!

"Hm… I guess from the look on your face that your daughter has run away. That's good." The woman shrugged. "Even if you are just humans, I don't really like the idea of killing children. There's no way she can maintain a barrier at her age. I'm totally fine with her fleeing Gensoukyo." Hitomi tensed as the Lunarian leveled her straight sword. "You, I'm afraid, I can't allow to live."

Hitomi wanted to make a retort, but it would be better to save her strength. Talking was only good if you wanted to prolong a battle.

Instead she concentrated on her breathing. Quick in, slow out.

The Lunarian lunged for her, sword ready for a follow up slash if Hitomi tried to parry with her gohei. Hitomi was sure if she tried to dodge there would be similar attacks.

So instead of dodging she jumped up with a deadly spinning kick and called upon the most esoteric border techniques.

There was a slight disorientation as space folded oddly and she reappeared facing the opposite direction as she had been. Then jubilation filled Hitomi's heart as she felt her foot land in a solid hit.

She knew better then to stay to gloat though. Summoning her strength she flipped backwards, landing just in time to see her foe's sword arc through the area she'd been standing previously. It was a wild swing, but Hitomi would have been wide open for it.

Snarling the Lunarian cut through the air, sending several mystical daggers flying towards Hitomi. Hitomi raised a barrier to block, then retreated again as the woman dispelled the barrier with a slap.

She had to find a way to end this fight quickly.

Hitomi's mind raced as she continued her fighting retreat. Her opponent had decent personal protection, otherwise that kick would have broken multiple ribs, but the Lunarian didn't seem able to stop instantaneous spells. Like Hitomi's teleport, or her physical strength boosters.

Which meant she had a one shot that could break though the woman's defenses.

She'd been pushed back to the rear of the shrine now, next to the koi pond that had run out of koi before she'd been born. If she went much further back she'd be in the forest, and the trees would be certain to trip her up. It was now or never.

"Hah!" Hitomi yelled loudly to draw attention to her attack then flung another set of needles at her opponent. Her heart rose when the Lunarian jumped to the side again, but she focused on the spell.

Once again the borders of the world shifted, and the needles appeared right behind her foe. Hitomi smiled in triumph. She only needed to hit and… !

The Lunarian was right in front of her, crimson hair floating around her face. Hitomi felt a shock, then a massive burning in her stomach. Then she was on the ground, looking at the woman's feet.

Her needles fell from the air as the magic that gave them flight faded.

Kanon, I'm so sorry.

"Mommy!"

No!

Hitomi's body screamed as she tried to look towards the voice, but she didn't care about the pain.

No!

Standing there, staring down at her in shock and horror was Kanon.

"You should have run little girl." The voice of her killer rang painfully in her ears. "I'm afraid now I'll have to kill you."

She wouldn't allow this. She couldn't allow this.

Hitomi ignored the burning pain from her torn open stomach as she pulled out one more iron needle. With the last of her strength she charged it to pierce through any magic then slammed it into the woman's foot.

There was a sharp shriek, then pain erupted in her chest. It was soon gone however. Replaced by endless darkness.

As Hitomi faded away, she prayed to whatever god might listen that she'd bought her daughter time to escape.

Kanon screamed as the woman stabbed her mother again. There was so much blood. Mommy had to be hurting a lot. She knew she was supposed to run, but she couldn't just abandon her mother like that. So instead she pulled out the two orbs that had passed through the family for generations.

"Please! Help me!"

The two orbs arced towards the woman, each attacking from a different angle.

The woman slapped them out of the sky with two short brutal strokes of her sword. The orbs dropped out of the sky and lay unmoving, their power banished.

Kanon whimpered and took a step back. Now what? Mommy was lying so still. She couldn't run yet. But she didn't have any other weapons!

The Lunarian took a deep breath and began hovering. Her face was a mask of pain instead of boredom now, and Kanon could see blood dripping from the woman's foot, but Kanon had no idea how to fight the woman. She only had mastered the yin yang orbs and some anti youkai charms. The woman here wasn't a youkai.

"That was your last mistake little girl," the woman said in an icy tone.

Kanon stepped back again. What should she do!

"Meeeeeeooooooowr!"

The two humans stared in shock as the red black cat that had visited her so often jumped between the two. The two humans froze as the cat crouched there, hissing at the Lunarian while its tail bristled.

Kanon winced in pain as a set of piercing shrieks assaulted her ears. Five flaming skulls burst out of the woods and flung themselves at the woman standing before the burning shrine. She cut three down with her first swipe, but the other two forced her to retreat a bit before she broke the remaining possessed skulls.

A black and red miasma surrounded the cat on the ground. When it cleared away a woman in black and red shrine maidens robes stood there, her twin tails and cat ears revealing to all the world her true nature.

The kassha hissed at the woman again. "Do Lunarians normally kill children just cause they're miko? Why don't you play with someone a little older, grandma?"

The woman sneered and raised her blade. "How lucky for both of us. Run away little girl. If this youkai 'miko' manages to stall me long enough you should be able to escape."

Kanon shakily got to her feet, but she couldn't bring herself to run.

"Don't worry kid. Aunt Orin has this covered." Orin barred her teeth at the Lunarian. "You don't think I'm a real miko? Take it up with my god. Okuu, show your stuff!"

Once again a dark miasma formed, then vanished in a burst of heat. A towering figure with dark black wings appeared before the kassha miko. The bloody woman stared in shock at the apparition. Finally she shrieked, "What! What have you done to the Yatagarasu!"

The goddess unfurled her wings sending her cape that gleamed with a thousand galaxies fluttering. Then she pointed the strange device on her arm at the Lunarian. The strange device and the gem on her chest began to glow with a terrifying light.

There was a sudden light impact and Kanon couldn't see anymore. The kassha had grabbed her and was running away. "We gotta retreat. That woman will figure out that Okuu's just a god like any other and do her damn banishing trick any second."

Finally Kanon founder her voice. "But mommy's still back there. We gotta go back!"

Kanon felt Orin's grip tighten slightly. "Kanon. Hitomi… Your momma isn't alive anymore. I can tell."

"No!" Kanon felt tears start trailing down her face again. It couldn't be true. The Hakurei maiden didn't die like that! They always stood back up at the last minute and defeated the evil! Her mommy was going to come back and win the fight any second now!

'And how many times did the old Hakurei maiden die just as the new one mastered her powers?' a dark voice in the back of her mind asked.

Kanon fell to her knees as Orin stopped. The world snapped back into focus, her mind trying to escape by focusing only on the present. They were in the forest now, though the heat from the flames was still present. Right in front of them was a cracked grave marker stone.

"Damn. It'll be hard to do this fast." Orin muttered next to her. The four eared woman chewed on her lip a bit, then whirled around.

Kanon looked back to see that hateful woman floating towards them. Kanon should have looked at the arms, or shoulder of her opponent but her eyes were drawn to the sword. The bloody sword that had cut down her mother.

"I keep expecting you to be sensible and run, and you keep disappointing me," the woman said coldly. "Well that's fine. I've changed my mind about wanting to kill you. Though I suppose I'm curious why you stopped running."

The kassha grabbed Kanon's hand again in a firm grip. "I wasn't running away. I was headed here to begin with."

There was a sudden sharp pain, and a drip of dark blood fell from her hand on to the worn and cracked gravestone.

This time there was no miasma. But Kanon could feel the dark energy coalescing. The creature was faint at first, but as another drop of Kanon's blood fell, it became more and more solid.

The green haired ghost in magician's robes opened her eyes. In her hands was a staff with a sharpened crescent moon. A bloody dagger was lodged in her back. She glanced around then smiled wickedly. "Well done little necromancer cat. You piqued my interest." The ghost glanced briefly at Kanon before returning her full attention to the wary Lunarian. "Your blood has summoned me, child of the Hakurei. Tell me what you want."

Kanon looked at the ghost, then over at the woman. The woman who had burned her home. The woman who wanted her dead. The woman who was still covered in her mother's blood.

"Kill her…"

The words finally broke through the emotional barrier that shock had created. Her voice rose with each repetition. "Kill her. Kill her! Kill Her!" She collapsed to her knees and started sobbing and shrieking. "She killed my mommy! She destroyed my home! KILL HER!"

The ghost's smile faded, then twisted into a bitter sneer. "Gladly."

The Lunarian flew forward, striking first, and the ghost's staff rose up to meet it.

The clash rung through the forest.

Chapter 3

"If love can destroy, can hatred save?"

Mima snarled softly as the impact of her staff against the Lunarian's sword sent them both reeling.

She was having a hard time keeping form. It had been over a century since she materialized, and she felt detached, even given the amount of magic that kassha was pouring into her.

She inhaled, her "breath" allowing her to refocus on her opponent. She saw the woman moving the fingers of her left hand in familiar patterns and felt a spike of disdain. "Do you think such a weak exorcism can banish me?" She swiftly recited the spell she'd developed so many years ago to counter such magics.

"Evil spirit disperse!" the woman yelled, thrusting her hand forward as she finished her banishing ritual.

Mima blinked so the flash wouldn't blind her. When she opened her eyes she smiled at her opponents dumbfounded expression. She pointed at the ringed orb over her head that was slowly pulsing with corrupted lifeforce ripped from the trees around them. "Now it's my turn. Orreries Sun!"

A wave of her staff sent four spinning orbs at the woman. As her target jumped back they merged together and exploded in a terrific blast. Deadly fragments of wood from the trees sliced through her form, but mere wood wasn't anything that could hurt her anymore. She did check behind her to make sure her summoner was still alive.

The kassha had grabbed hold of the little shrine maiden and was shielding her, both with magic and her own body. The sight made the knife in her back itch, so she looked away. She had someone to kill after all.

The woman had retreated to the treeline. Mima could smell the blood flowing from her wounds, only matched by the smoke from the burning shrine.

Mima felt odd as she remembered that this was the Hakurei shrine. She looked at her opponent with new feelings of amusement and disgust. "Did someone finally set up a rival shrine? They kill your youkai lover? Or did you just have a bad fortune?"

"Shut up ghost, don't bring me down to the level of these humans. I am a Lunarian! I am Uenaga Itaka," The woman snarled. "They were in our way so we eliminated them. Just like I'll eliminate you!" Itaka pointed and then the world turned into whiteness and pain.

Mima screamed as the lightning coursed through her undead form.

Fortunately when the power stopped so did the pain. She had no body to wound after all. Gripping her staff she swung it down as hard as she could while teleporting towards the woman. Her hands shuddered with the impact against Itaka's sword.

"I despise you," Mima hissed in the woman's disgustingly perfect face.

"As if I care about the jealousy of a human ghost," Itaka managed to grunt before gasping in pain. Mima felt a ripple of sadistic joy as her pressure forced Itaka onto the woman's wounded foot.

"Human? Human?" Mima sneered. "I smell your blood, and I can sense your heartbeat. You're just as human as all the others!" The dark sphere behind her began to pulse faster.

"You humans. You always point at someone and say, 'they're different. I'm the real human, they're just a mistake. They wear the wrong clothes. Say the wrong things. Use the wrong type of magic!'" She slammed her left hand down on her staff and was rewarded with another grunt of pain. "You think that giving yourself a fancy name and hiding away makes you scum any different! You are the same as

the bastards that murdered me! And you murdered the family of one of the two humans that treated me like I had a right to exist! You humans are trash!"

"Shut up!" Itaka screamed as she pushed herself upright. "I'm not a filthy human! I- AM- PURE!"

Mima's eyes opened wide in shock as she was slowly pushed back. Then her hatred flowed through her again. "YOU- ARE- TRASH!"

Mima pushed as hard as she could, but Itaka wouldn't budge. They stood there, fighting each other, whispering spells, counterspells and curses.

Then suddenly the air went cold and Itaka screamed. The Lunarian tumbled backwards as eight gaki ripped into the flesh of her stomach. The sudden loss of opposition made Mima stumble forward.

Itaka yelled out a word of power and the blood she shed exploded into pure energy, banishing the ghosts. But she was open.

Mima pointed at the woman and sent a cascade of stars at her. Most of the barrage slammed into the woman's front, and those that didn't ricocheted into her sides and back. The woman's strained wards collapsed.

Mima hesitated as Itaka slumped. Her foe was down, but something was wrong. She felt that her summoner was distracted. She turned to check on the kassha and the girl.

Just as the the young miko grabbed the bloody knife in her back and slid it free.

There was a short strained cry as Mima whirled around. And then the girl was standing over the body of the Lunarian, her white top stained with the blood pumping out of the fallen woman's jugular.

Mima slowly floated between the young girl and the corpse before removing the knife from the dead bodies throat. She then turned to face the miko who was still staring at the ground.

"I'm sorry. I should have asked before pulling out the knife," the girl said.

Mima simply shook her head. She wasn't sure how to respond any more.

Orin walked up behind the girl and pulled her into an embrace again. Mima wanted to yell at the kassha, but the magician realized that the Lunarian's final attack must have dazed the necromancer cat via backlash.

"Hitomi! Kanon!"

Mima looked up to see someone very familiar rush to the back of the shrine, frantically looking about. Then the woman froze. "Mima?"

"Marisa." The ghost floated back and gestured to the two bodies and the young girl. "The fight here is over."

Marisa blanched at the sight of the bodies, then dropped to her knees. "Dammit." The magician pounded her fist into the ground. "Dammit! Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!"

Orin lifted her head as her ears swept back. "I'm sorry sis. I couldn't make it in time. I ran as soon as I heard. But the elevator is broken these days, and well…"

"No. I should have ignored Hitomi and warded the damn place. I should have dragged her back to the mansion. I… I knew I should have…" Marisa finally looked at the young miko. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Kanon replied in a dead voice.

Orin looked at Marisa, as she smoothed the young girl's hair. "I'm gonna to take her back home. The girls will keep her safe." Orin

turned Kanon so she could look the young girl in the eyes. "You're a miko so the Reiuji Shrine will give you shelter, for as long as you need it. Auntie Orin promises, okay?

Kanon stared up at the kassha for long moment, before bursting into tears. Mima could only turn away from the piercing wails of the child. She floated away, as Marisa moved to comfort the girl.

She stared down at the bloody knife that matched the one that had taken her life so long ago. "Was I so different when I was human?" she asked quietly. But she couldn't answer that any more.

The knife disintegrated, returning to the fading memories of her long dead grudges.

Sighing she returned to where the living were discussing their fates. Kanon's crying had become simple sniffles now, though Orin was still holding her close. Marisa had turned away. Mima could tell her former apprentice was brooding, something the girl rarely did in public.

"Marisa's gonna go back to the war," Orin said as she slowly helped Kanon rise to her feet. "I'll be taking the girl to safety, at least until the war is over." Orin gave the undead magician a questioning look. "My summoning is gonna be over soon sis. You okay with me wandering off?"

"My magic will sustain me until I choose to leave. I'll look after the bodies until the Shikigami come," Mima offered.

Orin's eye's turned dark. "Just the one sis. I'll be taking that one." The kassha pointed towards the fallen Lunarian.

Mima looked at Marisa, but the living magician didn't move, so she shrugged. "Safe trip home."

"Take care sis." Orin tossed the body into her cart, took Kanon by the hand then headed back into the trees. As they left, Mima floated to

stand behind her former student.

Marisa was staring at the fire that was slowly dying as the shrine was consumed. Mima saw the young magician force her fists to unclench.

After a few moments she said, "Tell me Marisa, how do you feel about these Lunarians?"

Marisa was silent.

"Do you hate them?"

There was another moment of silence. Then Marisa replied. "Yes."

"I want to smash every one of the bastards here on the Earth. If I have to I'll burn their damned Lunar Capitol off the face of the Moon with my Hakkero." Marisa took another ragged breath.

Mima closed her eyes.

"Why?"

Marisa stiffened at the question. A question once asked by a young girl who wanted to become a magician when the girl heard her mentor say she hated humanity. A question that had never been answered.

Mima nodded her head mournfully and placed a hand on the young magician's shoulder.

"I have nothing left to teach you, my apprentice."

Marisa reached up and took her hand. Mima closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel the warmth of her student's emotions. Then she let the cold shroud of death cover her once more.

"Farewell. Marisa."

"Goodbye. Mima."

Ichirin did her best to ignore the stares of the humans as she scribbled sutras all along the walls. Most of them were outsiders after all, and they were unused to such obvious displays of magic. Unzan was getting a fair number of stares as well. Kyoko's ears received some looks, but people had gotten used to those quickly.

Still the fact that so many of these outsiders had willingly placed their lives in the care of the temple's occupants was a sign of how much the outside world had changed.

She finished up the final verse, and nodded as the words blended into the wood that made up the palanquin ship. "What ward should I put up next Unzan?"

Unzan's soft reply was interrupted by a violent shock. The wards all flared brilliant blue as something shattered on them. Then they slowly died down.

Except the one that guarded against fire.

The people below started to shout amongst each other. Ichirin could feel panic starting to build. She quickly moved over the entrance, and opened her arms to get everyone's attention. "There's no need to worry everyone! Unzan and I will keep you all safe." The nyuudo moved to hold up the roof to add credibility to her words.

"Yep! So long as you stay in here the wards will keep you safe from the crossfire," Kyouko echoed cheerily. "Don't worry about a thing."

The panic quickly subsided, though families started bunching together.

"Now we just have to hope Murasa can take care of the fire," Ichirin whispered softly. Kyouko nodded in reply.

She flew back up to the walls. She needed to start strengthening the wards again.

The four members of the temple leaped from their positions into the sky as a bolt of energy flew over the temple, then exploded, raining down liquid fire.

"Fuck!" shouted Murasa as the magical blast set the roof aflame.

Byakuren quietly sympathized with the statement. The attack was some kind of magical napalm. Even if there was no other fuel it would burn on its own. It would have to be extinguished somehow.

Shou immediately took charge. "Murasa, keep it from spreading! Your water powers can do that no matter what spell it is. Nazrin, form a conventional bucket brigade. Keep it away from any fuel!"

With that the new goddess leaped down from the heavens, Byakuren quickly following. She raised her spear, and lighting crashed from the clear sky at her command.

There standing in the shattered clearing created by the electrical blast was a woman. Byakuren could immediately see the near transparent walls of magic warding the woman from harm. "Shou, be careful. She's well protected."

Shou held out her hands and a spray of her twisting lasers fired out. "That doesn't matter. She will pay for daring to attack a shrine filled with innocents!"

"Hmph! You declared war on us, youkai," the woman replied. Byakuren watched as the deadly rain of lasers struck the woman, then vanished into nothingness as the woman's wards absorbed the killing power. "Now reap the rewards of your defiance." The woman again raised her hands and threw a ball of magical flame into the air.

This was what Byakuren was waiting for. Time seemed to slow as she entered her casting trance. She reached out towards the spell with her own power, trying to rip it apart and unmake it. Counterspelling wasn't in favor in Gensoukyo, but among magicians it was an effective tactic.

It was almost too easy to hook around the outer lines of energy. Byakuren ignored them and moved on. Those must be the shrapnel part. If she removed them, the spell would just regenerate them. Her target was the core of the arcane attack.

She prodded and poked against the core of the energy, trying to work her way inside it. This magic seemed to have a strange feel however. It shifted wrong to her mind. At first she attributed it to the oddities of Lunarian magic, but then she caught a glimpse of the inner workings. This was magitech! She didn't know how to cancel magic that was being run by a soulless device.

Time began advancing normally once again as her eyes snapped open. "Shou, I can't dispel it!" She dodged to the side quickly as the shot exploded above the two and rained down fire again. The scattered trees below turned into torches.

"Ahahaha! Couldn't you dodge it all, 'goddess'?"

Byakuren quickly turned to where Shou had been. Her friend had dodged to the side as well, but there was a patch of the napalm burning on her left hand.

Shou blinked then looked down at her hand. "Oh. That's why it's warm. I thought you'd gotten a near miss." Shou contemptuously flicked her hand to get the magical flames off. "I know you worry about me Byakuren, but you don't need to tell me to dodge if the flames don't burn."

Byakuren stared at Shou in awe. She'd known Shou was strong. That's why she'd chosen the woman to be an avatar of Vaiśravana.

But to ignore flames that could make evergreens instantly combust was far beyond normal strength.

As the halo around Shou began to expand, Byakuren realized her shock and the Lunarian's fear must be feeding Shou faith. "I would explain to you all the sins you are committing with your vile acts, but I'd be wasting my time." Shou gestured past the woman. "Your strength isn't enough even to defeat my old youkai self. Much less Byakuren and I together. You're a sacrificial pawn, sent here to delay my attack on more dangerous fighters."

"S-shut up!" the woman yelled. "Do you think I led off with my strongest spell?"

Shou shook her head. "Do you think it matters?"

Byakuren narrowed her eyes at that. Shou was obviously provoking the woman. Which meant Shou wasn't as quite as confident as she seemed. The tiger youkai was trying to draw attention away from Byakuren, so she could use her more potent spells.

Byakuren's biggest weakness was her devotion to ritual. Her strongest long ranged attack spells all took time to fire off. And she'd need a strong spell to break the Lunarian's barrier.

To understand was to act for the Buddhist nun. She began chanting one of her focused attack spells, doing her best to hide the lotus pattern that formed from the energy. She'd have to hope Shou could hold out.

The Lunarian raised her hands. "Let's try a real attack spell then!" Byakuren blinked as a wave of electricity crackled upwards.

Then shattered against an invisible globe as Shou raised her spear. "You think to test Bishamonten with lightning?"

Byakuren opened her eyes fully as she completed her own spell. The energy lotus bloomed around her, and she focused that power

into seven lasers. The Lunarian dodged to the side, but some of the beams still washed over her.

To no effect.

"That won't work!" Byakuren sidesteped as the Lunarian tossed another napalm sphere directly at her then took to the air. Now it would be even harder to get a focused attack off.

Byakuren sighed. She'd hoped to have a strong position to negotiate from, but it seemed that wasn't going to happen. "This fight is meaningless," Byakuren said to the Lunarian. "There's no one on the Earth who can threaten the moon. Why do you seek conflict here?"

"You assassinated our representatives. That's good enough reason to get rid of you. Besides you and the humans are just- ouph!" The Lunarian's words were cut off as Shou's spear knocked her back a few paces.

The weapon turned to light, then reformed in Shou's outstretched hand. "We killed no one. Your people are responsible for their deaths, as any fool could see. You seek excuses for your deeds, not justice."

"Why should I listen to the words of a youkai?"

Byakuren nodded. "Shou. You can go ahead now."

"Eh?" Both the other fighters looked at her in confusion.

"I've figured out how to defeat this woman. You don't need to worry about me anymore." Byakuren smiled at her former student. "Go on ahead. After all, she's only here to slow you down. We shouldn't let that happen."

"But Byakuren…" Shou had such a conflicted look on her face. Byakuren couldn't help but chuckle.

She regretted the impulse when their opponent took it personally. "You insolent bitch!" Byakuren dashed quickly to the side as her opponent raised her hands. The summoned lightning crackled off harmlessly into the sky.

Fortunately her quick dodge seemed to placate Shou's worries. "Alright. Be safe Byakuren." The new goddess hovered a bit higher, then dove below the tree line while running towards where Maribel, Ran and Renko were.

Byakuren turned back towards the Lunarian. "My apologies for appearing to ignore you, but I wanted to speak to you one on one."

The woman looked at her in confusion. Byakuren had to admit it was strange when someone went from fighting to talking politely. Even she had difficulty switching out of fight mode. "I wanted you to think on what your leaders have done. If this was about your emissaries, why are you not attacking Eientei? You know that they hold themselves apart from the rest of the world. Why do they seek war with humanity? Think on this."

The woman paused and frowned. "That may be true."

"But why should I care what happens to impure beings?"

The Lunarian formed another fireball. "You're good at dodging my attacks, but your friends seem to be having trouble with my flames. I wonder how long it'll take before it eats through your wards?" With a casual toss she threw it over the temple again.

Murasa and Nazrin immediately scrambled away from their firefighting attempts as liquid fire rained down on the temple roof. Then they scrambled back, though Murasa paused to shout, "Dammit! We were almost done! Go light yourself on fire you crazy murderous bint!"

Byakuren took a deep breath. It wasn't a problem yet. She was sure Ichrin could hold for another half hour with that much flame. But if the

woman kept targeting the temple instead of her, or if the lunarian changed spells…

"I warn you. I've seen the weakness of your shield. I don't want to hurt you, but if you continue to threaten innocents… 'The Buddha only forgives three times.'"

Byakuren saw a new spell begin to form around her foe. "And I've seen the weakness in your shield as well. Let's see who ends up begging for forgiveness," the Lunarian replied.

"Very well. Grit your teeth." Byakuren said simply.

Then she called on her true power and attacked.

She felt the temperature around her decrease for a brief moment as her opponent's spell went off, but by then she was already flying in front of her target.

She felt her hand break with her uppercut as it slammed into a shield stronger then a wall of iron. But just like iron the shield bent and shifted to absorb her blow, driving it's unyielding power into her opponent's gut. Her enemy had designed a shield that was perfect for dispelling magic, but poor at deflecting kinetic energy.

The Lunarian folded around the blow, and vomited up blood. Then the impact sent the woman flying into the sky.

Byakuren waited until the sonic boom from her first burst of speed reached her before flying behind the Lunarian. This time she clasped her hands together and brought them down in a overhead spike. Her broken hand twinged with pain, but she didn't think she had suffered any more injuries.

This time she started moving as soon as the hit was over. She reached the ground just in time to catch the Lunarian with a flip kick that sent her foe into a parabolic arc. She wasn't certain if she broke

a toe with that attack, but she was certain she felt one of the Lunarian's bones break.

The Lunarian landed with a crash in the clearing Shou had created with her first attack. Byakuren was pleased to see she'd missed the rocks and stumps still around. She whispered a quick prayer to start her own wounds healing, then floated over to the fallen woman.

Byakuren nodded in approval as she reached her opponent. The final impact had knocked the woman unconscious. The Buddhist nun quickly checked her foe's injuries. Five broken ribs, dislocated shoulders, minor internal bleeding, and the broken pelvic bone that had finished the fight.

Byakuren looked back towards the temple roof. "Are you okay Nazrin? Murasa?"

"Some of my poor mice got burned!" Nazrin called back.

Murasa poured water on another patch of flame before adding. "The fires are dying though! I think knocking the bitch out stopped their fuel or something."

"Good! I'll be up there in a moment."

Byakuren then turned back to her prisoner and started sealing the woman's magical powers. The one nice thing about fighting humans was that you could properly hold them prisoner without locking them away in horrible places.

As she began her work she prayed, "Good luck Shou."

Hopefully her old friend wouldn't need it.

"Dammit!"

Mokou swore as an explosion rang out from the south of the city. She immediately began running towards the blast. Something had gone wrong. Very very wrong. And Keine was in the middle of it.

All around her villagers were popping out of their huts and starting to flee as well, though most were going in the opposite direction. One group turned to her.

"Ms Mokou! What's going on?"

She spared them a quick glance. "Someone's attacking the village. They're just here to cause a fuss, so take everyone to the farmlands outside! Me and Keine will handle the rest!"

"I fear you will not, Fujiwara no Mokou."

Mokou stopped dead in her tracks and turned towards the voice. There, standing in the light of the full moon, was a young man in robes that might have been fashionable in the days of her childhood. His shoulder length hair was as white as her own, and he carried a sword and some other devices. Mokou could sense power flowing around him as well.

The young man briefly took his eyes off her to address the villagers. "I'm here only to deal with the one poisoned with the Hourai Elixir. You should take her advice and run. I have no desire for any other living beings to be harmed by our battle."

Mokou jerked her head to get the family moving again. As they ran off she responded, "How nice of you. Your friend down south doesn't seem to be quite as polite. I thought you 'pure' beings didn't need to care about us ordinary humans."

The young man nodded. "Just because we do not have to hold ourselves to such high standards doesn't mean it is not a good thing to do so." He pulled out a strange device. "Besides, as I said, I am here to deal with you. I have no interest in war. My mission is solely

to prevent those who have taken the Hourai Elixir from becoming a long term danger to the natural cycles of the world."

"Hm… Then why are you bothing me instead of the princess? This is all her fault anyway," Mokou muttered.

The man frowned. "Princess Kaguya was made exempt, for some reason." His tone indicated he didn't like it, which earned him a few points in Mokou's mind. "Besides she has more guardians. And you're far more dangerous."

Mokou looked behind her to make sure the villagers were clear before turning back to the man. "Dangerous? Yeah, you're right about that."

"Kaguya? I don't know what keeps her going. Bitch never gives me a straight answer. But me? For almost 1500 years I woke up every morning with one goal. To utterly destroy Kaguya Houraisan. Why? Because she insulted a man who abandoned me when I was a child. For 1500 years, that was my only reason for existence."

"Now things are different. I have a friend. Someone who understands me. I even have someone who kinda counts as family." She cracked her knuckles. "And I don't intend to lose them."

The man raised an eyebrow at that. "Are you trying to threaten me?"

Mokou took a step forward. "I'm saying that if Keine gets hurt because of this stupid delay I will hunt you and your people to the ends of existence. I am Fujiwara no Mokou. I can't be stopped. I can't die. And the only place you can escape my wrath is in the embrace of death!"

The young man shook his head. "I think not. For I, Jeo Hanli, will be sealing you away."

Mokou rushed forward as the man leveled the device at her. She was expecting to be frozen, burnt or otherwise shot by it, but instead

it just released a strange gas. She coughed violently as the sweet smell entered her lungs.

The young man nodded. "The gas will paralyze you, allowing me to finish the seal."

Mokou coughed once more, then rushed out of the cloud swinging. "Sorry. Eirin already used that on me. I've developed an immunity."

Jeo seemed shocked, but he quickly flipped over Mokou's headlong charge. "Eirin wouldn't have been stupid enough to use all the anti-Hourai weapons on you. I'll just have to keep trying!"

"Like I'll let you!" Mokou reversed her direction and lunged at the man again. She wished she could use her ranged magic, but using fire in the city was stupid.

The Lunarian hopped back again, firing out two more gas canisters. The first one made Mokou gag, even though she held her breath, but the second one was ineffectual. She forced herself to keep moving through the gas by trying to remember when Eirin had used them on her last. She idly guessed the first one was the gas that made her vomit out her stomach. Literally.

She took a deep breath when she passed through the clouds, then cried out as she hit a magical binding face first. Cords of raw energy wrapped around her then pulled taunt, digging into her flesh as they held her still. She swore. This was going to inconvenience her greatly.

She struggled against the magical bindings briefly to make sure they were strong enough to actually hold her. As she started her opponent started up a chant. Mokou couldn't recognize any of the words, but she felt lethargy start creeping over her. "Fuck!"

She took another deep breath and closed her eyes. This was going to hurt.

With a thought, she detonated the explosive charms sewn into her pants.

The first two blasts hurt the worst, considering they were right over her femoral arteries. The wounds there were fatal of course, her blood would pour out within the minute, but the secondary explosions made sure she didn't regenerate too fast and sent her into a pleasant state of shock.

Then she died.

Well she should have died. As her body scattered itself into a bunch of small chunks all over the village, the laws of reality noticed that her body and soul were no longer in concordance, and reset her body to its correct 'alive' state to fix the paradox. The Hourai Elixer was perfect in design. It didn't just prevent death. It made her existence one of the rules that allowed the universe to function.

But for one brief nanosecond she was dead. Torn to pieces. And the binding spell decided there was nothing left to bind and faded out.

Mokou forced herself to keep standing, even though every nerve in her body decided to finish telling her brain that it had just been ripped apart and exposed to the burning air. All at the same time. The pain was excruciating, but Mokou was almost used to it. She didn't have time to whimper. She had to move forward.

Mokou was swinging as she approached the stunned Lunarian. Her fist hurt as it slammed into his defenses, but they collapsed quickly. He obviously hadn't expected to be hit. They did give him enough time to fall on his ass though, which meant the blow only clipped his head and drew blood instead of slamming right through it. Mokou raised her hand to fix that mistake as Jeo fumbled for another device. He fired it into her stomach, but the impacts were miniscule. She swung down.

Then jerked backwards and screamed as electricity ripped through her body.

It hurt. It didn't hurt as much as blowing up did. But it hurt. And more importantly she couldn't control her body at all. Her nerves sputtered and jerked to the current pouring through the prongs in her flesh. She couldn't act at all.

Jeo stood. His face was solemn, but he was breathing heavily. "You are far too strong. Eirin was a fool to leave you unsealed." He shook his head. "I wish I didn't have to use this method, but you can't build up a tolerance to electrical shock."

"I don't know if you can even hear me, but if you can I hope it gives you some solace that I won't be fighting this Keine person. And that Kaguya will soon be sealed next to you."

Mokou's mind was a black haze of pain and impotence.

The pain she was used to. She'd been in so much pain before that her body had simply refused to stand. This was close to that, but not quite there.

Her weakness however infuriated her.

She was an unwanted child. She'd been granted her father's name, but only as a stopgap measure until someone more worthy came along. He ignored her in every other way.

She'd had no control over her life until the day she'd decided to run away. To kill the woman who had spurned the only thing she and her mother had ever wanted.

She hated being powerless.

Keine

The name rolled into Mokou's mind. She could see Keine, standing and looking around while worried. "Mokou, where are you?"

Mokou wanted to reply, but her mouth wouldn't obey.

Kaguya

That name two created a figure in her mind. Kaguya was lazing about, "I wonder where that girl went to?"

Mokou tried to scream her name at the woman so the damned Princess would never forget it, but her tongue wouldn't move.

Keine continued looking around, "Mokou… did you abandon me? Did I do something wrong?"

Why do you keep following me? Why don't you let me be?

"Well whatever. I was getting bored with her antics anyway," Kaguya turned away.

How could you forget me? You're everything to me?

"Mokou! I didn't mean to upset you! Please, help me! I need you!"

I love you. But you'll leave me.

"Eirin! Find me a new playmate. One that won't just wander off and abandon me."

I hate you. I want to be with you for eternity.

Mokou tried to reach out. To scream at them. Her soul burned with need. She didn't know which one she should reach for. She didn't know if she felt insane love or mad hatred.

But she needed to move and the world was pain and fire and it hurt and she wished she could die and the world was pain and fire and Keine needed her and the world was pain and fire and Kaguya was still alive and the world was pain and fire and she needed to help and the world was pain and fire and pain and fire **pain and fire.**

…

And if the world was fire, then she would burn

Jeo sighed, then started his sealing chant once again. He needed to do this quickly.

He took a deep breath, then froze. The woman, Mokou, was smoldering. At first he wondered if the modified taser was malfunctioning. Then there was a rush of heat and he fell down once again as flames erupted all along Mokou's back.

He stared in shock as the immortal's hand slowly began to twitch towards the prongs. "How… How?"

With a fierce scream the flames turned bright blue and the prongs and conducting wire melted into useless slag before combusting themselves. The useless device shorted out, and Mokou stood up to her full height, as the electrical shock faded away.

Jeo could only stare. It wasn't possible for a human. Even a human empowered with the Hourai Elixir. It just wasn't possible. "Who are you? What are you?"

Mokou turned towards him with burning eyes. "Keeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaaaaa!" The flames around the woman warped into the form of a Phoenix crying it's rage.

It wasn't human. It couldn't have ever been human.

Jeo didn't utter a single word. He just clawed himself to his feet and ran into the darkness.

The flames around Mokou died a second later and she collapsed to her knees. She was in massive pain, and her body was refusing to continue.

Mokou forced a grin and ignored it. Electrical pain faded fast. She'd be moving normally soon enough.

Wisps of the madness that had consumed her tried to force themselves into her mind, but she was good at repression. She just focused all her existence on her goal. If that was madness too, well she was used to that madness.

She pushed herself up to her feet again and staggered another three steps before collapsing. Then she rose and continued her halting march South.

She had to help Keine after all.

Notes : Sadly doesn't support the formatting I needed to get this chapter (and other future chapters) out. I've done the best I can with their limited tools. My apologies.

Chapter 4

A man cannot sleep under the same sky, that shelters his father's killer.

Lord Roun entered the staircase with great caution.

He *knew* his targets were in the basement. His power of direction sense was flawless. But the route his senses were telling him to take made no sense.

He was already on edge because of the sudden attack that had hit his group. He'd been waiting for the requisite fifteen minutes to pass before leading his assault, but then the trees had started exploding around his group. They'd been forced to rush into the mansion.

And they'd been greeted with dead silence. The halls were small and claustrophobic, but totally empty. The rooms were vast and open, and also empty. The mansion seemed more like the home of a ghost then a vampire. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Be wary," he repeated to his retainers, before turning back to the stairway leading to darkness.

He took his time descending, testing every stair for traps. There were none, but that only increased his worry. He wanted to just fly down the center of the spiraling stairs, but that was sure to be warded.

Finally after what seemed like an eternity he reached the bottom. There before him was the basement door. It seemed to waver and shift in the light. His objective was through there.

As he started inspecting the door for traps, it rippled. Across it's surface letters of blood began to form.

" *Through me is the way to people lost*

All hope abandon, ye who enter here."

Roun narrowed his eyes. "Oh dear. The melodrama." He began looking to see if there were more dangerous spells on the door, when it suddenly opened.

And then he realized what was wrong.

"You are in a maze of twisting corridors, all alike," giggled a chilling childlike voice. "Don't get lost now."

Roun nodded. "They've twisted space here. If we get separated it's over. Everyone stay together. I can lead us through."

"Yes lord," his bodyguard said. His other retainers nodded in agreement.

That said he turned back towards the maze and carefully entered it.

The voice had been right about one thing, the passages were twisty and all alike. The only features were the wall lights and an occasional carpet. If it weren't for his direction sense he would have been certain he was walking in circles.

The journey was just starting to get boring when a woman in Chinese garb casually walked out in front of the group.

Roun foolishly hesitated. Fortunately his retainers were much quicker to attack. A blast of raw chi joined a typical fireball and bullet spray as they attacked the devil before them.

The woman's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't hesitate in holding up her hand in a guard position. His retainers' attacks froze in place, lost in the void of infinite space the woman conjured up. "She's the source of the spell," he called out. "Use attacks that ignore distance!"

In response the woman casually flipped out a knife and tossed it at him. He blinked then jumped back in fright as the knife appeared

right in front of him. Roun raised his hands hoping the blade couldn't break his normal defenses.

Then Zhang was standing in front of him, grasping the knife firmly by the flat. Roun sighed in relief. He knew picking the young martial artist as a retainer was a wise choice.

The woman nodded, then yelled out something in a dialect of Chinese Roun had never heard. "What is she saying?" he asked quickly.

Zhang for the first time ignored Roun's question. Instead he snapped back in the same strange dialect.

The pink haired woman sneered, then ran away down a side corridor. Roun was briefly pleased, but then Zhang took off after her. "Wait you fool! If you get separated we'll never be able to meet up again!"

The young man ignored him completely. He just ran down the corridor, then turned to follow the woman.

Roun ran to the corridor's branch himself, but it was too late. The twisting passages had already reformed to separate the two groups.

"My Lord, should we search for him?"

Roun shook his head. "No. He is lost. We'll just have to hurry and hope that our foes waste time killing him while we finish off their allies."

Huian smiled as she led the fool deeper and deeper into the maze. Technically she should lead the bastard back to where the mistress was. That was the original plan anyway.

But this fight? This fight was personal. The mistress would understand too. In fact she'd specifically told Huian to have fun.

And there was nothing as fun as righting an ancient wrong.

Finally she reached her goal. One of the killing grounds. She ran to the other side and prepared for her opponent to arrive. It was a small room, just big enough for her to use her full techniques, while being too small for long ranged attacks to be that effective.

Of course it wouldn't help against this opponent.

The man ran in quickly after her, then stopped when he saw she was no longer fleeing. He quickly assumed a fighting stance before asking in the ancient dialect of the school, "You! Are you Meiling, the traitor?"

She took her own fighting stance. "No. I am the last master of the Dim Mak school, Izayoi Huian, daughter of Hong Meiling."

"I see. So she had a child, in defiance of the masters," the Lunarian said with scorn. "She was to pass the teachings down to a rightful heir, not continue her rebellion. Grandfather was correct. Teaching a woman the assassin's arts was a fool's endeavor. She was no match for the Yin forces she was supposed to control."

"Defiance? Hah," Huian sneered. "She followed all of the master's stupid rules. She married only a human who defeated her in combat. She taught me only because she couldn't have a son. And she never revealed to anyone the true power she possessed."

"That doesn't change the fact that she was overwhelmed by the dark power," the man pointed at her. "As your youkai tainted blood shows."

Huian couldn't help chuckle at that. "My blood is hardly tainted. I became a pure youkai when mastering the techniques, just as my mother before me. Though I have advanced beyond the skills of your masters."

"So you say," He moved to a more defensive stance. "If you truly are a student of the way, then you will surrender to me, first student of the masters. If you do so, then we may show you mercy as a fellow student."

Huian snorted and casually warped space to steal the boy's own knives. Then she tossed them and called on her power again to have them score his cheeks. "I owe the masters nothing. My mother served them once, but I serve only the house of Scarlet." She focused her chi, and a darkness formed around her hands. "I was born in the year and hour of the dragon, on the day of wood. I am the ultimate assassin. No one has mastered the forces of Yin more then I. I shall defeat you and prove my mother's style superior."

The man's eyes widened, then he wiped the blood away from his cheeks. "You talk too much woman. I am Zhang Luchan, grandson of Zhang Sanfeng. I will cleanse the taint of youkai blood from our school." He sneered. "Unless you plan to cheat your way to victory with your magic?"

Huian returned the sneer. "I shall let you strike me two times before I kill you. One for each cut."

"Let my first blow show you the weakness of your style! Let us see your Yin mastery keep up with Yang's range!" Zhang let lose a loud cry to gather his chi, then let loose a powerful rainbow chi blast. One that Huian knew would track her if she tried to dodge.

Instead she called upon her powers, and let the universe flow with them. The Yin energy in her hands acted like a vacuum for the Yang energy in the world around her. The darkness around her hands was surrounded by a rainbow mist that turned into lines of energy as she spun.

Her Rainbow Hurricane sent her opponent's chi blast ricocheting into the walls. Once again they faced each other. "What was that about weakness?" she asked. He simply frowned in return.

The two martial artists immediately sprang forward and clashed. Huian kept to her word, sticking to blocks and dodges as she tried to find a weak shot to let through.

Fighting like this, between hand to hand masters, was very different from danmaku. A single punch could be followed up by a block, a grab, a break, and a secondary strike, all within seconds. There was no thought of individual strikes or overlying patterns in attack. Only a concept of style.

Her opponent started the match with poking attacks. His blows struck quickly at her pressure points, trying to end the match before it began. She replied by changing her stances repeatedly to avoid his strikes and keeping her arms in tight for quick parries.

In order to force her to make a mistake he started adding piercing attacks. Strong foot stomps, straight punches and elbows all designed to stun her and break her guard so he could strike a deadly point. She began adding foot blocks and more active dodges to her defense, bending away from his attacks, and weakening his stances.

Suddenly he switched two of his attacks mid blow. Huian winced as he struck her. The strikes were shallow, but she was certain he'd hit some pressure point. And in a moment her thoughts were confirmed. "I see. You've sealed my magic."

"Indeed," the man said. "Youkai have no honor. If I am to defeat you I need to remove your advantages before you feel threatened."

"Hmph. Well it will be harder to get back to my mistress after your death, but Dinah's power is maintaining the spell at this point." She smirked. "And those were your two hits."

She sprang into action, jumping up then bouncing off the ceiling to slam into her foes guard. Zhang retreated against her crushing style, powerful kicks, sweeps and punches that crushed muscles and made bones ring. He tried to switch into the flowing counter style to

wield her own energy against her, but she added feints and short range energy strikes to her moves, the mystifying bludgeoning style.

"You can't keep this up forever," he shouted at her during a brief respite as she set up room for her next jumping kick. "You will wear out."

"I'm a youkai. You'll drop first," she replied before doing a short hop and sweeping. Her opponent was forced to leap over her.

She regained her stance and threw a driving kick at him, but he rushed right past it, clashed his arm into hers and struck her with a headbutt. As she fell back he continued his assault. The driving overrun style. It was denounced by many other schools as being crude and meaningless, since it relied on moving to near grappling range and simply hurting one's foe, but any true fighter knew how to use it properly.

Huian found herself being pushed back. Zhang was too close for her feints and strong blows. She had to rely on a retreating defense and some driving techniques of her own to keep from being overwhelmed.

A mutal headbutt sent them both reeling back. "I'll heal faster then you," she said when her head cleared.

"I'm stronger," he replied. "And given my mastery of Yang chi, I heal these type of wounds faster. You will fall!" Once again he rushed in.

But this time Huian saw an opening. "Haaaah!" She dashed forward herself and unleashed a barrage of kicks that slammed into her foes left arm and torso.

Then she felt a finger stab into her right side. She collapsed into a backwards roll, then attempted to assess the damage.

Her foe was standing back with a smug expression on his face. That was bad. "Hmph. All this talk of being a master of Dim Mak and you

forget the basics of pressure points when in a serious fight. How pathetic."

"My strike has disrupted your chi pathways. If you're lucky the resulting internal damage will destroy your heart and death will be swift. If not your body will slowly collapse, leaving you helpless before my attacks."

Huian tried to ignore his gloating and figure out which point he'd hit. After a few seconds she nodded, then struck herself on her left thigh, wincing at the pain. As blood trickled out she turned to him and smirked. "You're a fool. I've already shown you that I can use the innate chi of the universe to balance my own chi. Why did you think I couldn't fix an imbalance created by a wound?"

She shrugged and pushed herself to her feet. "I suggest you learn how to do that yourself. And quickly. Because otherwise you'll die in two minutes."

"What?" the man stepped back and entered a defensive stance, then winced as the wounds on his arms and torso throbbed. "Wait, the brain points? But you only did closed fist strikes! How?"

"Did you think summoning that Yin energy was just for show?" Huian shook her head sadly. "With the power of destructive chi I can focus the damage my blows inflict in any way I wish. I've been hitting the pressure points on your arms and legs throughout this fight. That kick to your chest was merely the final blow."

"Dammit, I won't lose to you!" Zhang jumped forward, his fists moving faster then before. "I will-" His voice cut out mid yell and his eyes crossed. Then he stumbled, fell and lay still. Huian knew that he'd suffered a massive fatal stroke from her attacks.

"Looks like I miscounted," she remarked to no one in particular. She considered the body a little longer before moving on. He was dead, and the matter was settled.

Her vengeance complete she turned and headed back into her maze. Without the ability to alter the paths it would take her some time to get back to where Dinah was, but that shouldn't be a problem. After all her foes would be lost in addition to having to deal with the maze.

Maribel silently watched as her friend inspect the knife Ran handed her back carefully before Renko sheathed it. "So this will cut through magical shields? Why don't more people use it?"

"It's a Yakumo trick," Ran responded. "You have to use an existing weapon. And it fades quickly. Yukari used it back when she got human warriors to do her work for her."

She handed the man a sword. "This blade and this blade alone can harm the oni. Use it well, samurai."

Maribel shook her head to clear the strange daydream away. "Did she do that a lot?"

"Yukari never did anything herself if she could get someone else to do it for her," Ran replied simply. "Then again I only knew her as a Shikigami, so she might have been more active before then. But to me she was always the chess master."

"Another thing you don't have in common, eh Mary?" Renko said with a weak smile.

Maribel tried to smile at Renko, but she couldn't keep it up. She turned her attention back to Ran. "Do you think she could have planned out all this? Are we still being manipulated?"

"No," Ran said. Then she shrugged. "Okay, perhaps she could have seen the war coming, but she couldn't have gotten all the details. She was not omniscient or omnipotent, no matter what she claimed. She thought at speeds even I am envious of, but I could always figure out her logic given enough time."

"I see." Maribel went back to looking over the treeline. After a few moments she noticed Renko had silently moved next to her. "Yes?"

Renko's hand gently squeezed her shoulders. "Maribel, are you okay?"

Maribel stiffened a little. "Yeah."

Renko just stood there. Finally Maribel sighed. "It's just… I…" She shook her head. "It's hard to explain. I hate them. They killed my parents. They killed so many other people." Maribel hugged herself. "But these feelings of rage. They feel… inhuman. I sometimes don't feel like I'm myself."

Maribel felt Renko's arms move from her shoulders to embrace her. "You're still you, Mary. No matter how strange the world becomes, you're still you."

"How can you know?" Maribel asked. "How can you tell what's me and what's not me?"

"I trust my eyes."

Maribel sighed, but she still smiled. "The same eyes that made you 5 minutes late to lunch?"

Renko buried her face in Maribel's hair. "Hey I just wasn't looking. It's not my fault I lose track of time."

There was a light cough from Ran. "I'm sorry but we're probably surrounded right now, so it would be wise to pay attention." The fox youkai actually did sound somewhat sorry, but the words broke the two out of their reverie. They sheepishly returned to looking over the treeline.

Still Maribel felt a little better as Renko took her hand.

Now if only she could calm the seed of anger that seemed buried in her heart…

"Any word from Chen?" Renko asked.

"Yuka apparently came out and got in a fight with one of the Lunarians. That's something of a good sign. It's hard to get constant feedback. She's trying to stay hidden," Ran's ears twitched as she mentally reached out to her shikigami again.

Maribel's heart flip flopped when the kitsune's face paled. "They've attacked the village. Keine didn't hide it in time."

Maribel had already ripped open the gap. She was starting to think about where she should end the portal when Ran waved her hands and dispelled it. "You can't go there! If we go there the village will turn into a bigger battlefield! We have to hope Mokou and Keine can handle it."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Maribel flung her free hand into the air. "Wasn't the Lunarian's leader supposed to send troops to hunt us specifically? Where are they? What if his plan is to send everyone to attack the village while we sit here being useless!"

"That would be incredibly stupid," Ran snapped. "The only thing that matters in the village militarily is Mokou. Unless we foolishly run into their trap!"

"This whole invasion is stupid! I'm not important militarily either!" Maribel shouted. "We can't just sit around and wait for everyone else to die!"

"Wait!"

Maribel and Ran both turned to look at Renko. Renko held up her right hand. "Mary's right. We have to do something. But it has to be something that messes up the Lunarian's plans. So why not this?"

Renko chanted a few quick words and pointed at the sky. A second later a flare shot up from her hand, illuminating the whole valley. As it reached the height of its arc it exploded into thousands of tiny stars

that swooped artfully through the air to form a sentence. All across the valley everyone could look up and see the words "Suck it, moonbitches," written in the heavens.

After a pause Ran said simply. "Well I believe that will draw attention. Marisa's work?"

"Yeah, but Dinah gave it to me," Renko looked mildly embarrassed. "Er, anyway that might get some Lunarians to go off plan, but it'll also draw them all here. We'd better head elsewhere."

"A smart plan. Too bad we found you first."

Maribel whirled to find two men standing at the edge of the tree line. She immediately leaped into the air as the two Lunarians opened up with magic and what appeared to be laser fire. The ground exploded under their withering assault.

Maribel flew backwards to get out of the dust cloud. As she did she saw Ran slam into the man on the left. A blue globe of energy formed between the two with an electrical crackle and the Lunarian began back-peddling.

Then Renko sailed out of the dust cloud, clutching her new Hakkero. "Stardust Memory!" her friend cried, causing streams of star bullets to cascade towards the man followed by two huge star shaped bullets. Maribel finally gathered enough of her wits to remember that she was supposed to be shooting too. After all, the danmaku she'd been training in was easy to call up and could still knock someone out.

"Flying Insect Nest," she whispered pointing at the Lunarian. In response several gaps opened up and began discharging lasers.

The Lunarian they were shooting at of course didn't stick around to get hit. He immediately took to the air as well, his shield absorbing the few bullets he didn't dodge. He began firing his laser rapidly at Renko, while summoning up another spell that sent two homing orbs

at Maribel. Maribel dodged through the air doing her best to avoid the persistent hunters. Her spell kept shooting on its own, but she couldn't focus any more fire at the man.

As Maribel ducked around another two orbiting attack spells she silently forgave Ran for all the danmaku exercises the kitsune had put her through. If it weren't for that she'd have probably already been hit. Right now she wasn't doing great, but she was still alive, and her spellcard was still going despite her lack of focus.

Renko still seemed to be doing better then her though. Probably because Renko had learned a whole bunch of shield spells, while Maribel only knew how to dodge and redirect attacks. Maribel saw at least two more of the ridiculously oversized star bullets and once Renko shot off a laser the size of her torso. Sadly none of them connected.

Maribel ducked under the homing shots once again, trying to think of a way to help Renko. She was considering switching to a weaker but more confusing spell when there was a sudden flash.

The next thing Maribel knew she was lying on the ground thirty feet away from where she started. She head was ringing and she felt something dripping onto her ear.

Renko was still attacking the man, though Maribel noticed her friend was being dangerously aggressive. Ran and her opponent seemed to be busy destroying the forest over to the side. Then Maribel realized that the liquid she was trying to brush off her ear was blood.

She must have gotten hit and used her gaps to escape. And she wondered if it was a bad sign that she still didn't feel much pain. Still she was able to pull herself to her feet. If she could stand, she couldn't be hurt that badly right?

That thought flashed through her head seconds before a fusillade of laser fire smashed into Renko and knocked her to the ground.

Once again Maribel felt like she wasn't in control of her body. This time however she saw her actions and understood them.

There was a point in space where a lot of debris was. Debris that was moving very fast. So she could put one gap there to catch it, and one to release it at another point. There were a lot of minor details to worry about, like relative speeds and angles. But for some reason she was confident she could work around them.

Maribel snapped back in control of her body just as the gap opened. There was a flash. What seemed like a moment of calm.

Then the explosion knocked her back to the ground.

She lay there until her head stopped ringing quite as badly, then stood up slowly. Her heart lightened considerably when she saw Renko standing up slowly as well. Her friends clothes were a little dirty but there were no visible tears. A second later Ran flew out of the forest, giving the all clear sign.

Renko gave Maribel a weak grin then her eyes widened and she flew over quickly. "Mary, are you alright? You're bleeding."

Maribel lightly dabbed at the blood. "I think I'm alright. It just hurts." She frowned. "And my hat's gone."

"Next time aim that at the air. It's safer that way."

She looked over to find Ran hovering next to her. The kitsune reached out and muttered a quick incantation. The ringing in her head slowly faded. "Thanks. And I don't know exactly what I did. It just came to me."

Ran frowned. "Hm… I thought I told you that spell. Well, we can worry about that later."

"Yeah, we need to get out of here quickly," Renko said. "I think we've drawn a lot of attention."

Ran nodded. "My opponent teleported away when you splattered that other man across the landscape. They know we're still alive."

"Splattered?" Maribel felt the ringing in her ears start up again.

She looked over towards the small smoldering crater on the ground where the Lunarian had been standing. As she stared at the place her eyes came to rest on an arm lying there, her eyes unwillingly followed the arm up to the torso.

And then she saw that there was only half a torso still there.

Maribel whimpered at covered her eyes with her hands. She heard Ran curse then tell Renko not to look. She felt Renko's arms embrace her. But she didn't understand those events. All she could see was the charred body to her despite her eyes being shut.

Her arms were suddenly yanked down and Ran's yellow eyes stared into hers. "Don't close your eyes. Focus on the battlefield. Watch the sky for us."

Maribel nodded shakily then stared into the air. It helped. A little.

"We have to leave. Now. Renko, keep an eye on Maribel. I'll take lead."

Renko gently took Maribel's hand and started following Ran into the dark forest. Maribel flew after her friend, but her mind was spinning in circles.

I killed him.

You killed a murderer.

I don't even feel bad about it.

He deserved to die.

This war is just senseless violence.

They killed my parents. This is about justice.

The two voices spun round and round in her mind.

And the worst thing was, she wasn't sure which one was her voice.

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[i]Suika casually reformed herself from mist, then punched through the wall of the giant mansion. The gate guard had looked like he might be a fun fight, but she was really more curious about why Yukari had given her the order to assassinate someone. Especially since she knew Suika would refuse.

Technically of course she should be helping the battle elsewhere, but this war was already lost. The Lunarians were too strong. Easily the equal of the lesser Oni, and Oni were the strongest race. The Lunarians had stronger magic too. She might as well satisfy her curiosity.

Rabbits scattered from the courtyard at Suika's entrance. Fortunately there didn't seem to be any guards back here. Kinda weird. In front of her was one of the Lunarian's fake shoji screens that were as hard as iron. Suika of course punched through that too.

The room she'd just broken into was a good sized office. The man there however had apparently been smart enough to grab a naginata when the battle broke out. He was currently leveling it at her. "Begone from my house impure one, if you wish to continue your sad existance."

Suika looked the man over carefully. "Hmmm… So you're the man Yukari wanted me to assassinate. Weird. You don't look that threatening."

" *You're an assassin? You won't find me easy prey!" The man stepped back and pulled out one of the strange lunarian weapons.*

Suika didn't pay it much mind though. It was easy to dodge with her powers. "Nah. No true Oni would stoop to being a hitman. A deva's got pride ya know. I just was curious why Yukari wanted you dead. You don't look too impressive."

" *Not impressive? I am the head of the Tachibana family, the largest clan on the moon. My family alone is greater then all the nations of your Earth." The man fired a shot at her. "You are nothing to me."*

Suika casually ducked and smiled at the man's words. "Hm… Ya really shouldn't be so arrogant. Us Oni really like to challenge people who are arrogant. And then I'd be doing Yukari's dirty work for her. We wouldn't want that would we?"[/i]

"Hey, why are we out here in the middle of nowhere? I thought you were going to fight!"

Suika snapped out of her reverie to grin up at the angry Celestial. "You don't like it you can go out on your own Tenshi. It's not like the youkai will complain."

"Psh. Like I could do that after you gave me that speech," Tenshi muttered. She slumped into a chair she'd pulled from one of the shattered office buildings surrounding the park Suika had chosen as her battleground. "How am I supposed to ignore something that would make an Oni act all cryptic?"

Suika stretched. "You shouldn't let yourself get caught by your curiosity like that. It might get you in trouble."

Tenshi looked at her suspiciously. "That's not something you'd normally say."

Suika's retort was cut short when she felt her enemy arrive. "Hm… Only one. That's kinda a surprise." She turned towards where the presence was approaching from. Tenshi sat up attentively.

The woman that entered the park wasn't exactly what Suika was expecting.

She was expecting the standard Lunarian, full of smug arrogance, and self-righteousness. Perhaps even a little rage. Instead she saw a woman staring at her surroundings like she'd killed her pet dog accidentally. She wondered if this encounter was an accident.

But the naginata the woman held dispelled that notion. She'd seen it before, a long time ago.

"Stay out of this Tenshi." Suika ignored the Celestial's stuttered reply and stepped towards the woman. "You're a long way from home."

The Lunarian finally focused her gaze on Suika, and her stance changed instantly. The womans shoulders lost their slump, and her eyes started burning with the desire to kill. "You are Suika Ibuki?" the woman snapped.

"That's right." Suika stretched her arms. "I suppose you're here to kill me?"

The woman looked surprised for a second at Suika's casual reply, but she recovered fast. "I am Shoutoku Tachibana, daughter of Ihara Tachibana, the man you assassinated! I have come for my revenge."

Tenshi sat up at that. "Assassinate?"

"Hm… Well I did kill him. I didn't mean to be an assassin, but well Yukari set us up." Suika shrugged. "You know how curious I am, and the old man challenged me. And we Oni have our pride. I can't refuse a fair challenge." Suika looked at the woman again. "Even if it means killing someone out of my weight range. That spear is pretty, but when I increase my size it won't even scratch me."

"That doesn't matter." Shoutoku pointed at Suika. "You've already fallen victim to my power. Your ability to grow and shrink violates

conservation of mass. My power is to make a rule unbreakable. You'll find you are stuck in your current size."

Suika blinked then realized the woman was correct. At least, something was blocking her ability to shift sizes. The little Oni frowned and cracked her knuckles. "Hm, it's only one of my skills, but that does make it more of a fight. You would have done better if you'd left me guessing about your ability. Do you think being a Lunarian means you need to give me some kind of handicap? Don't underestimate the power of the oni!"

Shoutoku looked down. "A Lunarian…" Her grip on her naginata began to tremble. "I betrayed my people, murdered my allies… I allowed millions to perish, and my actions here will doom countless more." She snapped her blade into an attack position. "All to get my revenge on you Suika Ibuki! I no longer can call myself a Lunarian, but that's fine. Because it means you can suffer more humiliation from dying at the hands of a pathetic human!"

"Heh. That kinda honesty is refreshing for a human," Suika started spinning her right arm in a circle, calling upon her powers as she did. A small rock pulled itself off the ground and flew to her hand. Then another, and another. Tenshi leaped from her chair into the sky as every piece of debris in the area started flying towards Suika's hand. Within seconds she was twirling around a boulder. "Let's see if you've got the strength to back it up!" she cried out as she tossed the missile at her foe.

"HAAA!" Shoutoko swung her polearm in an arc releasing a wave of magic energy. The boulder cracked, then split in two. The woman raced between the pieces swinging again towards the oni, only to have Suika block the blade with the manacle around her wrist.

"Hrm, not bad. I felt that," Suika said. The oni swung her off hand in an uppercut that sent Shoutoku leaping away. The woman flipped away again as the earth erupted from the force of the deva's will. As she leaped a third time Shoutoku pulled out an orb from her sleeve and threw it.

Suika tossed out a fake black hole then retreated. Then Shoutoku vanished. Suika sensed the woman reappear behind her and spun around to block an overhead cut from the Lunarian. Before Suika could counter Shoutoku reversed her swing and struck Suika in the stomach.

As the oni exhaled and skipped backwards to absorb the blow, her black hole ran out and the orb trapped inside exploded. Suika cried out in shock as shrapnel ripped up her back. It wasn't a life threatening injury, but she could feel blood.

She looked up and saw Shoutoku's wards slowly regenerating, as well as a slash across the woman's face. The woman had been willing to get caught in her own explosion to make sure it hit Suika.

"You gotta lot of guts," Suika gave the woman a respectful nod. "Now it's time I stopped holding back."

Shoutoku returned to her guard position. "I'm ready."

The earth trembled as Suika roared to the heavens. A black orb slowly formed above the park, and as it did small rocks and pebbles started slowly flying towards it. Soon the buildings surrounding the park began to twist and warp as the massive gravity well began drawing them in.

As the weakened buildings finally gave in the two combatants flew into the air, spear and fists clashing in brutal conflict as the broken ruins of humanity spun around them.

Eirin slipped out of the Bamboo Forest silently. She felt some guilt at not telling Kaguya or Reisen she was leaving, but she didn't want to have to deal with goodbyes. Hopefully they would be able to complain to her later.

She was pleased however that her one way teleporter was both working and undiscovered. She disliked fighting as soon as she

exited a teleport. It was disorientating.

In addition, that meant the army surrounding Eientei was likely there for containment. Or at least that's what it should mean. While undoubtedly there would be obstacles in her path, she was confident no one who wasn't prepared for her could keep her from causing a lot of damage.

She carefully drew her bow and began hovering towards where her instruments had sensed a large number of teleports. She preferred to use magic, but her people tended to have good magical defenses. Spells to turn simple sword strikes and missiles were easy, but more complex physical protections were very difficult and rarely necessary. It was far easier to leave that up to technology and spend your time developing magical countermeasures. And normally Eirin would consider that a good strategy.

However all of the Lunarian's technology was either created by her, or had been tested by her. She knew all their weak points.

She quickly reached the fringes of the bamboo forest, though you could hardly tell the difference from its center. She'd have to break out her stealth gear soon when she reached the rolling hills. It wouldn't keep her from being detected sadly. Lunarian sensors currently beat Lunarian stealth tech. But it would allow her to see her opponents before they shot her.

Suddenly one of her devices started humming. An enemy was near.

"Come out Yagokoro Eirin! I know you're there!"

Eirin sighed. She knew that voice. Of course since she wasn't a fool she checked her sensor before doing anything rash. Fortunately, it said there was only one Lunarian nearby. She wouldn't be overwhelmed. Of course if she tried to escape her opponent would be smart enough to get more allies. Confrontation had the best chance for success. Thus she stepped out into a small clearing in

the grove. "I thought you'd be smart enough to see through Lord Tenshou's lies Suri. I'm disappointed to see I was wrong."

There was a rustle as the woman stepped out into the clearing as well. She bowed slightly, then flipped her long ponytail behind her. "Actually I believe it's far more likely that the Watatsuki's deaths were fake. A ploy to get the Lunarians to flee our home without a fuss. A surprisingly successful one at that."

Eirin sighed and shook her head. "Your social math is terrible. You always assume all players are rational. In fact you're terrible with assumptions. This is why you're really only the 4th best scientist on the moon, despite the rumors."

Surprising the woman didn't explode in fury at her. "Hm… I'd say I'm the best scientist now. I admit though, I do want to prove it."

"Ah, so you're doing this for yourself, instead of being Lord Tenshou's lapdog?"

The woman laughed at Eirin's reply. "Don't be stupid. Why would I deliberately sabotage the invasion? In any case, I knew that I would end up facing you." She waved her hand and Eirin's magical wards collapsed. "After all, my power to banish magic makes me one of your most dangerous opponents."

"Yes, it is a very irksome power." Eirin sighed at the wasted time and energy she'd spent on her spells. She had to hope that her gambit would work, or she'd be at a disadvantage in this fight, despite all her knowledge. "I suppose now you're going to pull out that gun of yours and shoot me."

Suri shook her head sadly. "I would enjoy that immensely. However, it seems there's a flaw in the weapon. It seems to violently explode under certain, very rare, circumstances. A tiny design flaw." Suri looked Eirin straight in the eye. "Something that seems to afflict most of our technology. All of which was designed or tested by you at some point."

Eirin smiled briefly. "Indeed. A faultless weapon is too dangerous to allow to exist. Everything needs a weakness. For example that shield you're using tends to ignore phasing weapons." Eirin rapidly drew the arrow she'd palmed and fired it.

It flew straight and true, a testament to Eirin's continued training. The phasing enchantment also worked, allowing the arrow to pass through her foe's shield.

Suri gasped and collapsed backwards as the shot punctured her lung and heart.

Eirin shook her head. While she considered the words 'a senseless waste of life' to be self serving tripe, she did regret the need to kill the woman.

Still what was done was done. She moved forward to collect her arrow.

Then she froze as Suri ripped the arrow out of her chest with a cry of pain and stood up.

"Fuck! Dying hurts more then I imagined." The Lunarian inspected herself. "And my shirt is ruined, though there's no scar. It seems the experiment was a success."

Eirin shakily stepped back. "Don't tell me you took the Hourai Elixer?"

"Ahahaha! Of course not." Suri calmly readjusted her hair. "I have created something that is superior to the Hourai Elixer! A potion that prevents traumatic death, while leaving natural death unchanged." She smiled. "Of course, as a Lunarian I need not fear natural death."

"And with that I've finally broken free of your shadow. That I get to be the one to dispense 'vengeance' on you for the 'murder of our emissaries' only makes it sweeter!"

Eirin sighed at that. "Wait, that's the potion that uses rosemary, mercury and and myrrh for the filter, correct."

Suri stepped back in confusion. "Yes…"

"Oh, you fool. You really need to test things better."

Eirin shook her head as she continued. "I created that Elixer first. I just never used it because it is innately impure. Now that you've drank it, you'll never be able to escape the taint of the earth. You can't be killed, but you've renounced your status as a Lunarian. You're just another human who will age and die."

"You- You're lying!" Suri threw the arrow aside. "There's no way I could have made that mistake! I tested it on a lesser moon rabbit. The Hourai trees didn't react to her!"

"That's because their nature is of the moon, not the earth." Eirin shook her head. "You must have finished within the last three years, because otherwise you'd have noticed when the poor creature died from the poison you put into it's body."

"NO!" Suri shook her head. "No! You're lying just to distract me while you work out a countermeasure!" She raised her hands. "I'm going to kill you here and now, and there's nothing you can do to stop me! Your magic and weapons can't save you Eirin Yagokoro!"

"My magic is useless yes, but my weapons are far from such," Eirin replied as she drew another arrow. "All I have to do is hurt you so badly you can't move."

Suri pointed and a batch of magic arrows formed around her. "You'll be dead before that happens."

Eirin simply released her shot and jumped away from Suri's counter attack. Sadly the other woman was probably right. The chances Eirin could hurt the woman badly enough to keep her from moving without her magic was slim.

But Eirin wasn't going to give up. The numerical odds had no meaning when battle was unavoidable. She would either win, or die.

And she was going to do everything she could to win.

Mystia's voice didn't falter as she desperately dodged and weaved through the air while the Lunarian filled it with deadly magical shrapnel. To sing and to hunt were part of her very being, as natural to her as breathing. It might be arrogant to sing the song of death to one so much stronger then her, but that was what she was. Even if her attacks were no more dangerous then the pecks of a mockingbird were to an eagle, just like that mockingbird she wouldn't stop.

Fortunately the fires that the woman had been so eager to start had turned into a liability. Mystia had learned the hard way that her night blindness could be defeated if her opponent knew some way of changing vision types. But the magic flames would make looking for heat or spiritual power a total waste.

Her voice reached a crescendo and her own magical attack manifested as small familiar spirits in the shape of birds that flew out away from her leaving magical shots in their wake. A worthless attack compared to the night blindness she was inflicting but she wouldn't hold back anything in this hunt.

Still she had to admit the real danger in this fight came from Keine. The Lunarian could track Mystia's voice to get an idea on where she was, but Keine was effectively invisible until she attacked, sending waves of magical magetama and swords at the opponent. So far they'd all smashed into some shield, but Mystia could sense that protection was slowly fading under Keine's assault.

As this passed through her mind a mystical knife grazed one of her sensitive wings. Mystia forced herself to sing a little louder to keep the shock from disrupting her melody. When she recovered she dove and spun to check the damage.

The knife wound was superficial, but she saw her opponent setting up magical mines. Ones that looked a lot like the Black White witches' anti air spell. Mystia carefully calculated out what areas were safe, then soared into the air again. Her heart and voice soared as the Lunarian's lasers shot past her into the infinite sky. She wondered if she'd ever be able to match this performance.

As she turned around again she saw that Keine hadn't dodged as well as she had. Probably because the Were-Hakutaku hadn't had an aerial view of the attack. The Lunarian was trying to take advantage of that by blindly tossing as much magical death towards where she thought Keine was. Sadly it looked like the woman was good at guessing because Keine was being forced back.

Mystia noticed the woman's back was wide open. She dove again.

The expression on the Lunarian's face when she realized what Mystia was doing was beautiful. Almost worth the loss of surprise. As the woman spun to face her deadly voice Mystia angled in the opposite direction. She passed the woman at chest level, her deadly claws raking along the woman's back. Mystia felt a strong painful resistance, then a weaker resistance, and then she was past her foe. A faint but sweet smell rose into the air from the blood that stained her claws.

Mystia rose in a sharp loop as the Lunarian attempted to exact retribution for the attack. Bullets screamed through the air beneath her as she soared.

At the height of her ascent she found herself staring up at the full moon.

It hung in the sky, its power filtering through the air. It seemed wrong that these people claimed it for their own. The moon was part of the night, and the night was the domain of youkai.

The moment passed. She righted herself to continue her assault.

And then she was falling.

Mystia didn't feel like she'd been hit. Her flight magic just didn't seem to work anymore. She tried to flap her wings to get altitude the normal way or to glide, but that didn't work either. She panicked as she plunged towards a burning house. Nothing seemed to work. In the end all she could do was curl herself into a ball right before she hit.

Through sheer luck she crashed into a window. The bamboo left only bruises as she snapped through them into the miniature hell that was the burning house. Her song cut off as the smoke choked her lungs and the flames seared her wings and arms.

She hit the floor in a roll, and kept rolling, doing her best to keep any part of her body from lingering the flames long enough to catch. She cried out in pain as she slammed into a table and bounced off into a chair, but she didn't let herself stop moving. Her hands screamed in pain as she pushed herself off the floor and began running.

There were no convenient windows in the back, but the door looked like it had been damaged in the attack that had set the place ablaze. Mystia sprinted for it and hit it with another rolling jump. For a second she thought it might hold and send her bouncing back into the flames, but the cheap latch gave way and she tumbled out into a medium sized alleyway.

Mystia picked herself up and began a staggering run away from the burning building. She was sore all over, and she could feel splinters sticking into her flesh, but she had to get moving. She had to find some way to get back into the sky.

She'd made it five steps down the alleyway when the building exploded, knocking her back to the ground.

"Forget the stupid plan! I'm not going to suffer this indignation one more second."

Mystia pulled herself to her knees just in time to see the Lunarian woman float over the flames of the ruined house. The woman's face was now covered in ash and sweat, and Mystia could see where her claws had left their mark. She forced herself to stand as the Lunarian's face twisted in scorn and hatred.

"A night sparrow? I knew it was a bird, but I was hoping for something mildly threatening." The woman began summoning up a spell. "Well whatever. I've bound your wings little bird. Don't worry though, I've left your voice so I can hear your screams!"

In response, Mystia took a shuddering breath, ignoring the smoke, and defiantly began her song again.

The Lunarian's spell was a wave of light that cut through the alleyway. Mystia barely jumped to the side before it caught her. The night sparrow began to advance on her blinded foe, when the earth itself exploded.

All the minor burns and splinters seemed to disappear when the rock shard stabbed into her. The pain was maddening, expanding from her stomach to fill her body. Her wings spasmed uncontrollably, striking the earthen spear that had pierced through her.

The magical earth faded, and Mystia slumped again to her knees. She clasped her hand to the hole in her stomach, but the blood still flowed out. She tried to breathe in, but pain shot through her torso.

"Get away from her you murderer!"

Mystia looked up to see Keine descending on the Lunarian, waves of deadly magic springing from the Were-Hakutaku's hands to smash into the woman's shields. The Lunarian swore and returned the assualt. The two spellcasters abandoning subtlety and tactics, each trying to overwhelm the other with raw power.

Mystia slowly and painfully managed to get herself sitting upright as the two clashed. Finally Keine reached out and grabbed the woman.

"This ends now!" Keine yelled out as she brought her head forward. The Hakutaku's horns shattered the Lunarian's shield.

"Shut up!" the Lunarian screamed in defiance. There was a flash of light as the woman activated a short range blast spell, and Keine staggered back, her own shield failing.

Mystia saw that Keine wouldn't be able to recover fast enough. The Lunarian was already summoning up a quick attack to finish the half beast. And if Keine died it was all over.

The deep breath she took in was pure pain. Her voice was weak and warbling from her wounds and bad positioning. But she ignored all that and forced her song out over the battlefield once again.

The woman shrieked in frustration as blindness covered her eyes once again. "You stupid bird!" The Lunarian whirled and flung the magical spear that formed at Mystia.

The weapon slammed into her left arm below the elbow, severing it in two. Mystia felt the pain shoot through her again but she turned her shriek into part of her song, a wailing plea for strength and vengeance. She was a youkai. This wouldn't stop her. Her foe had to be exhausted too, and the Lunarian's defenses were all but gone. She only needed to sing a little longer.

The Lunarian tossed magic randomly behind her, stunning Keine again, then began advancing on Mystia. There were no words this time. Just a mask of hatred.

One that turned to shock as a figure strode through the flames of the ruined building.

Mystia stared in wonder as Mokou ignored the quick spell that ripped through her lungs. Mokou didn't even flinch. She instead looked over the scene the turned back to the Lunarian.

The immortal didn't bother with spells or fighting techniques. She grabbed the woman by the arms before the Lunarian could flee, picked her up with a grunt, then whirled around fast enough to slam one of the burning house beams straight through the woman.

The Lunarian gasped and twitched. Mokou glared at her, raised a hand, and set the woman on fire.

Mystia slumped back again. She was hurt. Hurt badly. She wasn't sure how much damage an animal youkai like her could take and live. She knew she could regenerate her arm, but her stomach was something else. She'd lost a lot of blood too.

She blinked and found Mokou and Keine standing above her. They looked worried. That was strange, a human and a Hakutaku worrying over a predator like her.

Her pain lessened a bit, and she started to understand the words the two were saying. "Can't you make the wound go away?"

Keine shook her head. "It's too recent, and the witnesses are too strong. I can only hide the damage for a while."

"Dammit! Isn't there anything we can do!" Mokou yelled.

Keine started. "Binding! Of course!. If we have Mystia bind herself to the village as a guardian spirit, she can heal. The time outside of history will keep her body from getting worse, and…"

"No."

Mystia managed a weak smile as the two turned towards her. "No," she repeated. Breathing was starting to hurt less, but she knew her time was running out. She had to make sure they knew what she wanted.

Keine looked shocked. "But you'll die if you don't!"

Mokou held up a hand and looked her in the eyes. Mystia saw pain and worry there. She could see that the immortal really was only thinking of helping her, not trapping her for her own gain. Mystia was a hunting youkai. A curse on humanity. But it made her happy to see someone, even a human, cared for her.

Finally Mokou nodded. "She's a youkai Keine. This is what she wants." Mokou moved up to Mystia and gently took a hold of her. "Get the village out of here. The farmlands too. There's a chance more of those bastards will come by."

Keine hesitated a moment more, then nodded with tears in her eyes. The village turned dark and black, then slowly faded away, leaving a grassy field. Mystia felt some relief as the wall behind her vanished, letting her poor wings finally get some air. Mokou held her upright still, keeping her body from getting injured further.

She'd been tempted. She knew being bound to the village as a spirit of vengeance wouldn't be bad. Even if there were those who would insult her for not being human, there were those who would celebrate her for protecting them. And those strange creatures like Keine who would stand alongside her.

But she was her own master. She was a hunting youkai. And she would never let herself be trapped in a cage, no matter how nice it was.

There was a flash of pain as Mokou lifted her up into the sky. Mystia winced, then smiled. She was happy the immortal understood her. Her posture was right, and she was flying in the sky.

Mystia closed her eyes, took a painful ragged breath, and sang a song of freedom.

Chapter 5

It is good that war is so terrible, lest we become too fond of it.

The moon shone down brightly on the Misty Lake, creating a pure reflection in the waters.

The reason for that of course was that Chamaka had no intention of letting some fairy sneak up on him and hit him. Sure there was no chance anything a fairy threw at him would hurt, but it would make him look foolish.

And his mission tonight was to spread fear.

He'd already scared the fairies in the Forest of Magic enough such that they didn't dare reveal themselves. Now he'd chased a trio of the smarter ones to this locale and was cleaning up this rat hole.

His eyes caught some more movement. A curious fairy of leaves who apparently had missed the demise of its fellows was floating up from the banks of the lake.

Chamaka put his boredom and annoyance into a set of bullets and fired it at the creature. Unsurprisingly it failed to dodge, probably figuring it would just die and be reborn like usual. The horror that erupted on the little things face when the bullets hit was almost pathetic. The little creature screamed its girlish scream and then disintegrated, leaving only a few dead leaves to float down.

"Hey! What are you doing to my friends!"

Chamaka turned to find a small ice fairy trying to fly at him. Strangely a wind fairy was trying to pull her away. "Cirno, this guy is too dangerous! We have to run!"

The ice fairy shrugged her companion off. "No, Daiyousei. This guy's the one messing up the lake. He's been destroying our friends. What

would Letty think if I let this go!" The fairy pointed at him. "Hey you! I'll never forgive you for hurting us nature spirits! Hold still so I can freeze you!"

Chamaka was surprised. Loyalty wasn't one of these creatures' strong points. Still he wasn't here for research. With a wave of his hand he conjured the concept of extermination into the form of several knives. The smaller fairy let out something that sounded almost like a sob and ran, but the ice fairy stayed put. Chamaka launched his attack. It made no attempt to dodge, it only raised its hands.

And then, seconds before the first blade hit the fairy, a wave of ice reached out from the creature and the blades froze solid. Then they shattered.

Chamaka frowned at that. "Well. That is novel."

"Now it's my turn!" the fairy proclaimed, firing off some icicles at him. Fortunately the spread was crudely aimed. He took his time dodging the missiles in order to figure out how to bypass that peculiar defense.

After a moment he decided to try the obvious solution. He concentrated his mind on the light of the sun, and focused it. The fairy would have difficulty freezing this. Holding up his hand he unleashed a laser.

"Wha! That's cheating!" the little creature yelled as it tried to dodge the beam. Unfortunately for it, there was no way to avoid the spell forever.

Suddenly there was a click and a bright flash. His laser fizzled.

"Pure and Honest Reporter, Shameimaru Aya is on scene to report on the invasion! Sir, could you please give your name for the article?"

Chamaka dived backwards and tried to aim the laser he was summoning at the voice. His vision cleared just enough to see a tengu standing there winding a camera when another photo shot went off.

This time he had enough presence of mind to blink. When he opened his eyes there were two female tengu flanking the confused ice fairy. The newest arrival seemed to be fiddling with a cell phone. "Don't worry about being properly quoted. The Kakashi Spirit News is doing this as a joint interview with the Bunbunmaru News. We pride ourselves on only using your own words to make you look like the jackass you are."

Chamaka reinforced his aegis as he carefully inspected the two tengu. The odds had suddenly shifted. By a great deal. He looked over their devices and nodded. "I see, so you've managed to create conceptual weaponry as well. Impressive."

"Huh?" The second tengu and the fairy looked confused at his statement.

Aya on the other hand narrowed her eyes. "I see, that's how you are able to kill fairies permanently. You can give form to concepts and legends. Since fairies are just personified concepts you can attack their life directly."

"And your cameras draw upon the legend of photography stealing souls to drain that energy." Chamaka replied. "Though it's far from perfect. Still, as Tengu you must possess other skills as well. You seem like opponents worthy of my full attention."

"Hey! I'm your opponent," the little fairy called out. The arrival of allies seemed to have emboldened it.

Chamaka ignored the creature for now. The tengu were far more dangerous. He needed to keep them trapped, so their speed couldn't be used against him. He had faith in his aegis, but it was foolish to let your opponents gain an advantage.

He raised his hand and concentrated. Above him in the air a horrific buzzing sound began. The tengu and their fairy companion looked above him just in time to see the swords start forming and circling, like metal vultures.

"These swords represent the hatred and sorrow of every human that failed to reach their goals." Chamaka felt the blades straining at the leash, but he held off for a few more seconds. "They are relentless in their pursuit, and their desire to crush the hopes of others knows no bounds."

He lowered his hand and the blades paused, then began to fall in a rain. "Let's see if your photography can capture this story."

Aya gritted her teeth and floated just a little forward as the blades rushed towards her. She resisted the urge to try to run through the wall of blades with a well timed camera shot. While that might work, Hatate would be hard pressed to follow her, and Cirno would be doomed.

Finally at the last second she back dashed away and took a snapshot. The wide lens caught the first wave of swords and drained their energy away, quickly drawing the power to her camera. She began winding furiously to set up her next shot. "Your turn."

"Right!" Hatate took over, moving forward to take her own picture of the swords raining down. The other woman's camera cleared a slightly smaller swath. It paid for its quick reload time with a smaller frame and no zoom. Aya swore when she saw more distant blades still angling towards them.

"I've got it!" Cirno said charging forward. Aya felt her tengu pride complain at needing aid from a fairy, but her camera was still winding. The camera's anti danmaku feature took a lot of energy, and while their foe's 'conceptual weaponry' was apparently weak against the feature, it took even more power to banish then normal bullets. She just hoped Cirno had enough energy to clear out a good chunk of them.

Cirno waited until the last second, then used her freezing trick again. The swords surrounding the ice fairy froze with a crack.

Then a wave of frost that was almost faster then a tengu eye could follow ran through the blades, freezing them all solid.

The click of Aya's camera recharging brought her out of her stunned state. Her camera couldn't clean out such a large swath, but it was a kappa tool, one that didn't use her full power. It was possible that a fairy as strong as Cirno could beat its power while going all out.

She turned back towards the Lunarian. She needed to take command of the fight. Unfortunately he seemed like the type who enjoyed gloating and attacking at the same time.

Sure enough he raised his hands, and flames appeared in the sky. "Extinction class events leave scars in the consciousness of all life." Aya felt her blood run cold as the meteors above came into focus. "I don't know if this is really how the dinosaurs were wiped out, but it should be enough to be rid of you!"

"Climb!" Aya cried out as she flew towards the assault. She began plotting a course between the rocks, and she hoped that Cirno and Hatate's danmaku skills would allow them to do the same.

Hatate was beside her seconds later. "This is insane! How can he be this strong?"

Cirno was right behind her. "Damn, using fire this early is cheating!"

"Stop whining and dodge!" Aya replied to the two. Then she followed her own advice and broke off, preventing the man from targeting all three of them at once.

The first few seconds of the meteor rain was the worst. She had no idea what how fast the rocks were moving, and if her camera could clear them out. The first flaming rock singed her arm as she passed, and then two of the meteors in the second wave collided sending a

wave of shrapnel at her. She brought her camera up and snapped a photo, clearing those chunks up and dousing some of the flames.

Now that she'd cleared a little more room Aya took a look around. While the attack was brutally random, it wasn't too hard to dodge most of the time. And all three of the youkai had an escape card they could play. Most importantly, the rocks faded away before hitting the earth. Either the Lunarian couldn't sustain the barrage that long, or he wasn't certain he'd survive the impact. Either way, it was good to know that there were limits to their opponent's power.

Now it was time to counter attack.

Aya zipped between two meteors, dodged some lesser debris and then, with a swipe of her fan fired a massive wind gust at the Lunarian. She smiled as the man's own rockfall got caught up in the attack. "All right, take this!"

Then she swore as they all shattered on an invisible shield.

The man raised his hand and a mass of bullets formed. "Clever. But my aegis can withstand any attack. And unlike the original I can reform it whenever it becomes weak."

The bullets manifested themselves as the annoying seeking amulets the Hakurei used. Aya quickly ducked behind one of the meteors for protection. "Cocky bastard, aren't you," she muttered as she began considering her next plan of attack.

Her plans were interrupted by another wave of amulets. "Why couldn't you be completely arrogant and try to passively kill me?" Aya swore as she began weaving her way into the heart of the meteor attack, doing her best to skim just out of the flames reach of the larger meteors so they could provide her some cover.

A small fast rock smashed open one of the meteors in front of her, causing her to flinch. She instinctively took a picture of the deadly rain coming at her then swore again when she realized she had a lot

of winding to do. She quickly retreated to where Hatate and Cirno were making their stand.

"I'm starting to change my mind about active interviews," Hatate grumbled as her camera went off again. "Any bright ideas? I'm getting frozen and roasted here."

"Yeah all this fire sucks! I want to freeze all the rocks!" Cirno complained.

"That's nice. I want to not die!" Aya snarled. "And if we want that we'll need to find some way to get an advantage."

"It seems that simply dropping rocks is a mistake." Their annoying foe called out. "Let's try something more direct. Weapons tend to leave strong imprints on people's minds. For example Gungnir, the All Father's spear that never misses seems to have lingering power even after humanity's fall. Even in your minds."

"Oh great, we're going to be killed because Remilia was pretentious about spell card names." Aya sighed. At least her camera was wound. "We'll have to hope our cameras can stop it, Hatate."

Hatate pulled her phone out. "You go first. Yours has a zoom after all."

"What about me?" Cirno protested. The two tengu ignored her.

A brilliant flash of steel was the only warning Aya got of the spear's approach. However years of photography training hadn't gone to waste. She'd taken a snapshot of the weapon before she realized that their familiarity with Remilia's version of the Gungir had made the point crimson.

Her camera shot visibly slowed the weapon. It looked less like certain death, and more like the spear it was. Hatate raised her camera phone and snapped her own picture. The deadly aura faded more.

But the ancient god spear that was the core of the weapon kept hurtling straight towards Hatate's chest.

A streak of blue intercepted the spear. The weapon slowed as it froze, then dropped out of the sky into Cirno's hand, where it shattered into pieces.

Aya was so shocked she barely remembered to dodge the meteors still raining down. Hatate just let herself fall down about forty feet.

"Alright! I'm all charged up now!" Cirno declared. "Let's freeze everything! Perfect Freeze!"

A wave of bitter cold washed over Aya, setting her teeth to chattering. Even more startling the flames around the meteors died down, then faded away as the rocks slowly froze.

For a moment everything was still.

Then the Lunarian's meteor rain shattered as one, the tiny harmless fragments of the once mighty storm falling down to the lake below.

"I'm the strongest!" Cirno said with pride.

Hatate was first to break the silence. "Holy shit."

Aya had to agree.

"I don't have a clue how the hell you did that. But I've decided to actively try to kill you as well," the Lunarian said to the fairy. "I'd like to see an ice fairy try to shatter Excalibur."

A glowing golden sword, more perfect then any blade Aya had seen before, materialized beside the Lunarian then flew directly at the little fairy.

There was no way Cirno could handle that solo. The two tengu both rushed forward to add their camera skills to the fray.

This time Hatate was first to get the shot. Aya finished winding and fired off her own photo seconds later. The golden glow around the weapon vanished, to once again be replaced by Cirno's frost.

The dream of the sword of promised victory shattered before the incarnation of ice.

Out of the corner of her eye Aya saw the Lunarian casting. That had just been a diversion! "Dive!" She yelled. The three youkai swooped down towards the lake, pursued by a massive laser of focused 'sunlight'.

As they reached the lake's surface Aya saw another laser sweeping towards them from the other direction. There was no way all three of them could dodge both lasers if their foe had any competence. She only had one trick left, and it was based on hearsay.

Still it was better then nothing.

She turned and fired a barrage of dense but slow danmaku bullets between the Lunarian and the ice fairy. "Cirno, freeze these!"

"Okay!" Cirno, being Cirno, didn't hesitate. Her power turned the danmaku into a hemisphere of ice.

Ice that disrupted and scattered the focused light that struck it.

"Hah!" That interview with Marisa had been good information. She'd been betting a lot on it.

"Tonbo-giri."

Aya's eye's snapped up at the Lunarian's words. He'd had another attack waiting! Aya pulled up her camera to clear away the legendary spear, but there was only a whir when she pressed the button. No charge!

Then it, like the other weapons that had come before it, turned blue and shattered.

"H~How?" She asked in awe. There was no way Cirno should be able to continuously freeze things like that.

"W~w~what's up~p wi~wi~with that~t?" Hatate asked as the two tengu shivered.

Wait, why were they shivering? Aya looked around, then yelped and flew about a hundred feet away from the fight. Hatate was beside her in seconds. "Why are we running?" the younger tengu asked.

"Look at the lake," came Aya's reply.

All of the combatants looked down towards the waters of the lake to see the surface slowly freezing, inch by inch, in a ragged circle around the icy fairy.

"That's impossible!" the Lunarian whispered. "You can't *gain* power from canceling attacks."

Then Aya fully understood.

"Reisen was right."

Aya raised her voice to carry across the lake. "You can't destroy energy. It has to go somewhere. So where does the energy Cirno removes when she freezes things go?"

"It has to go inside of her."

Aya looked the Lunarian in the eye as she continued. "Normally that doesn't mean much. If it were heat energy Cirno would overheat and have to waste power cooling herself. But your constructs don't use heat. They're made entirely of conceptual energy, the same as fairies are made of."

"Which means every attack she's frozen has made her stronger."

"Just as you are the perfect enemy to fairies, fairies are the perfect enemy for you. And what's worse, now that you know she can

absorb your power, you can't help but unconsciously feed her with your fear." Aya stated.

"Nonsense!" the Lunarian retorted. But the frozen circle around Cirno continued to expand.

Cirno looked up at the Lunarian. "You've killed a lot of my friends. You Lunarians destroyed a lot of trees, and birds, and flowers, and even humans. You've all hurt nature a lot." Cirno's voice was deadly serious. "I'm not the smartest fairy. I know that. But I also know we fairies are part of nature."

"I don't know what purpose fairies serve. But I'm going to protect this place. I'm not going to let you hurt anything else!"

Aya stared at the fairy. Was this a hidden depth that she'd never seen before during their occasional games? Perhaps it had something to do with the massive power flowing through the fairy? Or maybe Cirno had absorbed more then just the energy of the concepts that had been thrown about.

"Brave words." Power swirled around the Lunarian again. "Let me show you the cost of courage. Death of the Light Brigade."

The Lake seemed to explode with sound and fire.

From all sides cannonballs flew in at Cirno as their invisible launchers roared. Aya thought she saw smaller bullets as well, but the gunpowder smoke obscured everything. Cirno disappeared in the barrage, then there was a flash of blue as the fairy once again froze and absorbed the attack. But the guns didn't stop. Once again the tiny fairy vanished.

Aya was wondering if she'd made a mistake holding back when a rush of freezing wind once again swept over the battlefield. She called upon her tengu strength to shrug off the cold. Hatate gasped beside her. "She's frozen the whole lake!"

Sure enough the entire misty lake was covered in a light frost. As were Aya's geta.

"Got anything else!" Cirno called up to the Lunarian.

The man finally lost his cool. His fancy outfit was covered in frost, and his breath was misting in the air. "Enough of this foolishness! I can't be beaten by a simple ice fairy! Let's see if you can handle the very concept of fire itself!"

"Attack now! When his guard is weakened!"

Aya nodded and rushed towards the man. She took a quick snapshot as she flew in, weakening his shield, and Hatate did the same. She slammed into the remaining shield and bounced off, but Hatate's kick actually broke the thing. Aya was about to cheer when she saw Hatate falling back, her momentum expended.

Then a green haired fairy appeared behind the shocked man and buried a shard of ice in his back.

The Lunarian gasped, but he kept charging his spell despite the lethal wound. Aya swept her fan and sent a gust of wind to shatter the ice shard inside his body at the same time three icicles from Cirno sunk into the man's chest. Somehow he kept his spell forming until Hatate righted herself and crushed his throat with a roundhouse kick.

The man's spell fizzled away and he plummeted through the sky to crash on the ice on the lack, sending cracks through its surface. Aya nodded to herself when she saw the crack through the reflection of the moon. Their part of the prophecy was complete.

"I thought you ran away, Daiyousei," Cirno said to her fairy friend. There was no condemnation in her tone, just confusion.

"Well, you know I'm not that good in a straight fight," Daiyousei replied. The little fairy hugged her friend. "I'm so glad you're safe

though!"

Cirno allowed herself to be hugged for a while before drawing away. "Daiyousei, I gotta help our other friends. These Lunarians are bad people. Someone's gotta stop them."

Daiyousei looked worried, but the fairy simply nodded and fluttered her wings. "You're really brave Cirno. Just be careful, okay?"

Cirno looked over at Hatate and Aya. "Are you two coming?"

Hatate shivered and shook her head. "I think you might do better on your own. We'll stay in reserve if you need us."

"Yeah," Aya agreed. She didn't want to test if Cirno could accidentally freeze a tengu.

Cirno shrugged. "Alright." She flew off towards the shore opposite the forest of magic. "I better find Star so she can help me search!"

Aya rubbed her hands together to return the warmth to them. She planned on following the fairy, just in case. But at a much safer distance this time.

"Hey, Daiyousei, was it?" Hatate asked while turning towards the green haired fairy. "Why did you tell us to attack the guy?" Aya started when she realized the voice telling them to attack hadn't been Hatate's. "Did you think Cirno couldn't handle it?"

"Fairies aren't supposed to be powerful. Nature can be strong yes, but fairies like us aren't nature's strength. We're nature's beauty and presence. We're supposed to be weak and simple. There are a few exceptions here and there. Bent rules. But no fairy is supposed to have the power Cirno now has." Daiyousei shook her head sadly. "You've seen already how she's changed."

The little fairy looked directly at both the tengu. "I wasn't afraid she'd fail."

"I was afraid she'd succeed."

Aya shook her head to clear it. She didn't have to understand it, she just had to write it.

She looked up at the moon, then down again at its broken and bloody reflection.

"Eh, served the jerk right," she muttered to herself.

"Yeah," Hatate said. Then she punched something into her cellphone camera. "Well we'd better hurry up if we actually are giving Cirno backup. At least then we'll have an excuse for letting her take the guy out."

Aya smiled at that. "Yep! 'Lunarian defeated by fairies! A joint investigation!'"

"Now let's go make sure people will be around to read it."

Roun stared at the two doors. One was built of metal, and inscribed with many old and damaged charms meant to seal the inhabitant of the room inside. The other was simple hard wood. And his senses told him both contained a terrifying power.

He turned to his magical specialist, "Fukuko which one has the vampire?"

The woman concentrated for a moment. Then she pointed to the massive metal doors. "The vampire is beyond there. However the other room has some great magical ritual going on in it. Something much stronger then the maze surrounding us. It seems like a summoning ritual…"

Roun thought over the matter quickly. To leave a vampire at one's back was nothing less then suicide, especially a vampire who had the ability to destroy anything at will. But to let a magician get off a

summoning ritual was also asking to horribly torn apart by creatures from beyond. As much as he disliked the thought he'd have to split his forces.

"Miki and I will attack the vampire. Fukuko and Shii, go stop the ritual." He looked his followers in the eyes one by one. "Don't get obsessed with victory, it's possible you got unlucky and your foes have a number advantage. If you have to retreat, fall back to the other group. Just don't fully disengage."

"Yes Lord," they all replied.

He nodded and set up next to the door, Miki opposite him. The other two retainers ran to the end of the hallway. He held up his hand, silently counting down from five, then kicked in the door.

The room was huge and the walls almost featureless. Scattered about were odd crystals, broken furniture and rotting dolls. In the center of the room was a obsidian throne where the tiny vampire with mad crystal wings sat drinking red liquid from a wine glass. On either side of her stood a maid with blond hair, seemingly perfect twins. The only other intact objects in the room were a picture at the far end, and an iron coffin in the far corner.

Roun immediately fired off a laser at the vampire. The throne exploded as the monster scattered into bats, then reformed. The two maids rushed forward, but were brought to a halt by a barrage of magical kunai.

"How rude," the vampire said in a disturbingly childish voice. "You didn't chat. You didn't give a one liner. You didn't even look at the picture. How disappointing."

"Indeed mistress," the maids said in perfect harmony.

At their words Roun's eyes unconsciously drifted to the painting. At first it seemed like a normal painting of the crucifixion. Then he saw the face of the man being crucified was twisted in pain and torment.

And it was his own face.

"More cheap melodrama, monster?" He pulled out the magical artifact he'd been granted for this attack. "Let's end this now, before you embarrass yourself more!"

"It seems he didn't like it," the maids said.

The device flew out of Roun's hand into the sky. "I wonder if you'll be so carefree under the sun's light?" he asked mockingly.

There was a flash from the device and it dropped to the ground. The vampire looked depressingly unburnt.

The vampire giggled and clapped. "Good work Juri! I knew your anti sunlight charm would work!"

Roun began to feel fear rising as the maids curtsied. "I'm glad to be of assistance to you mistress. Most of the work was Patchouli's of course."

"Well, now that that's done, I guess I'll just make you go Kyuu!" the vampire said with a giggle.

Roun couldn't help flinching away as the Vampire's eyes glowed with eldritch energy. He'd been warned about the power of Flandre Scarlet. This house had been investigated thoroughly after their solo assault on the moon. He knew what she was capable of doing.

But he'd also been prepared for it.

Flandre held out her hand and reached about, then frowned. "Huh, you're hiding your eye. Clever."

"Attack now! Focus on the vampire!" Roun called out, while drawing his own weapon.

"As if I'd let you!" The maids called out, moving to flank Miki. Roun hoped his assistant could either finish the duo off quickly or lend him

some occasional support. But right now he had to follow his own advice.

He attacked first, a shot from his weapon streaking straight towards the vampire's head. In response she jumped up to the ceiling and dropped on his position with enough power to shatter the floor. He flew into the room to avoid the attack, all the while firing his weapon and casting quick spells with his off hand. Flandre simply laughed and swept the attacks aside with a massive sword of fire. "Your magic is no use against the sword that will consume the world."

Roun continued his barrage. It was useless, but it would at least keep the vampire off balance. He could tell she was holding back, either to taunt him or because she was being cautious. If she saw weakness he would be forced to run or die.

A sudden presence at his back forced him to duck. A barrage of bullets flew overhead from behind him. Flandre giggled again. "Oh! Still alive? I see how you Lunarians managed to beat big sister when she flew to the moon." She swung the flaming sword again and Roun fell backward, the heat reaching for him like hungry claws. "But I'm a far more terrifying monster then she ever was!"

"So you admit you're a monster," Roun snarled as he fought to gain distance. "The world has no need of your ilk any longer!"

Flandre pouted at him. "That's not fair. You humans called us into being, calling us from nothing with your fear. Because you needed to believe something, somewhere was responsible, that there was something you could defeat to make your fear go away."

Roun found himself backed towards the corner. He quickly activated one of the charms he carried and teleported back near the door before starting up his withering fire again. "We don't need that anymore. We Lunarians have nothing to fear from things like you."

"Ahahahaha!" Flandre hovered in the air, her strange wings chiming. "Fool! I am Flandre Scarlet. I am the embodiment of the end of form.

You who have lost eternity, know that you have only fallen deeper under my influence!"

Roun snarled. He knew the vampire was goading him, but there was only so much his pride could take. He pulled out another magitech weapon from his robe and leveled it at Flandre. "We shall see vampire!"

Flandre laughed maniacally again. "That's the spirit! Come at me with all your power! Show me whether you are a man or a dog!" She jumped up towards the ceiling and Roun began dodging again as they both stepped up their assault.

Juri was careful, using her doll to draw attacks, while keeping an eye on her mistress. While she loved Flandre dearly, Juri had enough analytical skill as a magician to know that Flandre had a terrible habit of holding back. Flandre had spent so many years learning how to control her power, that now she had a tendency to control herself even when it wasn't prudent. Admittedly as her natural vampiric bloodlust and arrogance kicked in that would all go out the window, but until then her mistress would be vulnerable.

That fit with Juri's attack technique fortunately. She preferred to let silence and her 'twin' Juni unnerve her opponent before she drew close for the kill. Proper misdirection required your opponent to get into a pattern.

She spun away from some laser fire, always pulling her doll to flank the opponent. She didn't react differently if she was the target or the doll was. She simply dodged and struck, alternating between sword slashes, knives and rainbow colored magic.

Then she felt a slight tug. She looked over to find that her doll had suffered a cut to the cheek from one of the Lunarian's spells. She frowned. "Oh dear."

"First blood," the woman said coldly.

Juri sighed, then drew a knife and carefully traced the wound on both her and her doll's face. The cold metal felt strange, and the cut stung as the blade passed, but soon she was a proper twin to her construct again. She smiled at the woman's look of revulsion. "Hm? You don't like my art?"

The woman responded by shooting at her. However the attack was more ragged then her previous strikes. Good. She was getting to her foe.

"Did you like the painting at least? I made it personally. I think it adds a lot to the room," Juri said as she continued to circle. She frowned at the woman's snarl. "Oh, too bad. I put so much effort into it. Just like the doll that's helping me attack you."

"Doll?" The woman's stance weakened as she looked back and forth between the two. "Dolls that bleed?"

"Of course. If you use human flesh to make a doll it will bleed, right?"

The woman froze in shock. In that moment of weakness Juri struck. She moved forward and slashed high, while her doll moved and slashed low. She felt her blade strike the woman's shield and cut through.

But there was no resistance where her foe's body should be. Flew back and up, as a flurry of laser shots cut through the area from the corner. "Reactive teleports. You're better equipped then most."

She paired up with her doll then rushed the woman, this time abandoning mirrored movements in favor of active dodging. Her foe seemed to have a lot of devices, but little natural talent. Juri could probably take the woman out one device at a time.

Assuming her foe didn't have anything in reserve.

Juri stopped her rush and unleashed a series of rainbow lasers at the Lunarian. There was another flash as she burned through

another one of her foe's reactive teleport wards. This time Juri was ready and she quickly found and continued the assault on the woman.

"I'll tell you something interesting," Juri said with a smirk as she continued her now unpredictable assault. "The picture shows the person you love the most."

The Lunarian swore. "What? Do you want some recognition that you're a sick twisted freak? Or do you claim to be normal?"

"I'm hurt." Juri accompanied her frown of dismay with a barrage of knives. "I'm just a simple artist. If my medium focuses on sacrifice and suffering, so what? How can you claim to be immortal but not understand my work?"

"Humans know they live for eighty, ninety years if they are lucky. Still they expect to die one day. We immortals will always die in tragedy and sorrow." Juri's expression slipped. "There is no slow slipping away in the night for us. No polite goodbyes to friends and relatives. Just a terrible accident, or a sudden absence."

"Hmph. Maybe for you, but we Lunarians will live forever!"

"Oh?" Juri renewed her assault causing the woman to fall back. "I think you're going to die right now."

Then a new power flooded over them and they both instinctively shuddered. Juri knew immediately what it was.

Her mistress was no longer holding back.

Her foe's expression showed that she understood the battle had completely shifted in the earthlings favor. She closed her eyes. "Activate offensive override."

The atmosphere seemed to shift. Juri pulled back, placing her doll on defense as well.

The Lunarian's next attack was a quick step teleport followed by a sword slash that sent Juri's doll tumbling backwards. Juri rushed her foe from the side, but the Lunarian batted her sword aside with a backhand strike and sent her realing backwards with another one.

The young magician felt pain as her mind registered the cut. It seemed to go from her lower left rib to her chest, but it was shallow. She was glad she inherited her mother's petite figure, because otherwise she'd be losing even more blood.

Her painful hazy ruminations were interrupted by her foe looming over her. She decided it was time to steal from her opponent's playbook and teleport away.

She appeared along with her doll behind the iron coffin. A good thing too, since her foe was standing over a crater in the floor. Juri winced and started up curtain fire, alternating with her doll.

Her foe responded by pulling out a device and tossing it into the air. Juri recognized it as the magical equivalent of a flash bang right before it went off.

This was her chance.

She closed her eyes and toss out a precast illusion spell right as the explosion occurred. Then she had her doll stagger about like the spell had affected it, while she dropped limply to the ground.

Seconds later there was a tearing sound and a shower of blood as her doll was brutally chopped in two.

She jumped up from the ground, swinging her blade. But somehow her foe jumped back away from the deadly surprise attack. "Out of tricks," said the Lunarian coldly.

Juri shook her head. "One more." She drew her blade across the palm of her hand allowing her blood to drip down onto the coffin, where her dolls cold blood already lay.

The Lunarian lunged. For one brief moment Juri thought her gamble had failed, and she would die here, failing her mistress and her family.

Then there was a horrendous shriek and bang as two small arms ripped through the coffin and grabbed the Lunarian. The woman barely had time to gasp in surprise before a childlike blue haired figure tore through the coffin lid, opened her mouth wide and bit into the Lunarian's neck with a sickening crack.

The room fell silent, save for the slurping and dripping sound of Remilia's first meal on awakening.

Finally Juri managed to look over at the man who had been fighting Flandre and smile through the pain of her wounds. "One should always remember; there are two devils in the Scarlet Devil Mansion."

The man vanished as he teleported away.

Juri slumped against the wall, closed her eyes and called upon her healing spells. She'd have to be more careful in any future battles. Magician youkai could survive greater trauma then normal humans, but they still were weakened by blood loss.

When she opened her eyes she saw Flandre hovering over her. She smiled up at her mistress. "Don't worry. This will heal in a day."

"Of course, you're my maid after all," Flandre said with a smile. She turned over to where her sister was standing. "Well you finally decided to wake up. Why'd you wait until now? 300 years of moping not good enough for you?"

Remi tossed the drained corpse to the floor and wiped at the blood that had spilled from her messy eating. "I've been trying to wake up for the past week! Did you forget vampires need blood to wake from torpor in less then a month little sister? If Juri hadn't doused me I'd still be there."

"Forget? You never tell me these things!" Flandre yelled. "It's not my fault you're stupid."

Juri coughed. "Mistress, I imagine the man who ran away is going to help those likely attacking my aunts and sister."

Remilia sighed. "She's right. Besides this is obviously Patchouli's fault for not telling you."

"Ah! Good point." Flandre sprung forward and hugged her sister. "Well lets go kill the people breaking in and yell at her like old times!"

Remilia hugged Flandre back. "Yes." The two sisters' eyes both started to glow with a terrifying light. "Let's show them the power of the Scarlet family."

Juri pushed herself to her feet. The hunt was about to begin again.

Jiyuwan felt the watchful eyes of the tengu on him, but he marched forward unafraid. They were curious, yes. Some angry as well. But none of them had the desire to kill. Without the will to attack, anger meant nothing.

When he reached the Great Tengu's lodge, that changed. Five wolf tengu, all female oddly enough, stood before the entrance. Two of them looked at him with open aggression. It wasn't a strong killing intent, but they were probably restraining themselves. Obviously they disagreed with whatever orders were holding the others back.

Far more dangerous were the other three. From them he could feel nothing at all, for those who dedicated themselves to the sword considered killing the same as breathing.

Still, he had been expecting such opposition. He continued walking forward.

The leader of the band motioned to the other four tengu and they moved out of his way. She then bowed to him. "You are the Lunarian assassin?"

Jiyuwan returned the bow making sure to never let his eyes drift from his opponent. "Yes, I am. Though your lord is merely my first target. I am here to kill all the tengu, as my lord commanded." He made sure to sound properly apologetic. These warriors deserved proper respect.

"I understand. In deference to the rest of the tengu, our lord has requested the honor of dueling you personally." The wolf tengu frowned. "I was supposed to ask that you merely faced him one at a time, but it seems that is unnecessary."

"My Lord believed that I, unworthy as I was, would be able to cause enough damage to keep the Tengu out of the battle. Please understand there was no insult meant in that judgment." Jiyuwan started forward again. "And I accept your lord's request. I assume he awaits within?"

The woman nodded and opened the door. "Yes. All has been prepared for your arrival."

He gave her another polite bow as he passed into the darkened chamber. The shoji panels had been arranged to give him but one corridor to another set of double doors. When he arrived at them they blew open with a rush of wind. "Please enter."

Jiyuwan complied.

In the center of the room was a small table with two tea cups on it. Opposite it was the Great Tengu. The man he'd been sent to kill.

The Great Tengu poured tea, first into his own cup, then into the other.

Jiyuwan gave the man a nod of respect and sat down.

"I apologize for selfishly wasting your time with this," the tengu said. "But I did not want the Lunarians to think us ordinary monsters to be hunted and slain."

Jiyuwan sipped the tea. It was of good quality, but slightly bitter. "It is I who should apologize. Given your skill with the sword I should have attacked you from stealth. I hope you see my willingness to approach you openly as simply arrogance on my part, and not an insult to your personal skills."

"I thank you for your words."

Jiyuwan could see the Great Tengu's eyes flicker over him. Studying every movement he made as he drank his tea. He did the same, marveling at his opponent's perfect ambidexterity and calm demeanor.

Perhaps this was another vice, Jiyuwan thought. This polite pretense that they weren't going to try to brutally murder each other. This play act to help hide the fact that war was about people slowly dying as they tried to scoop up their own intestines, and the screaming of widows and orphans as their families burned. A truth that even this war, a war mostly fought by a few champions, could not escape.

Maybe this was why he'd failed as a teacher. All his students had learned this polite conflict. The trappings of war to make it less evil then it was. But they'd never seen the evil beneath to know the true horrors this was all supposed to cover up. They knew how to make war more civil, but not why civilized people should avoid it at all costs.

"You know you can't defeat all of us," the Great Tengu said quietly. "Even if you defeat me the other tengu will cut you down."

Jiyuwan looked the tengu in the eye, surprised by his foe's tone. There in the man's face he saw something he did not see on many foe's faces. At least, not before the clash of arms. Then he understood. "You know of my Lord's power."

"Yes," replied his foe.

Jiyuwan felt a smile pass over his lips. This was a fitting fight for him.

He looked down at the cup. It was a marvelous piece of craftsmanship, and while certainly younger then him, it had great age to it as well. It had seen many meetings, and served many dignitaries.

"Do you like the cup?" his host asked.

"Yes. I wanted to study it. After all it is certain to be destroyed by the winds caused by our fighting." Jiyuwan looked up at the tengu. "Just as we are certain to be destroyed by our refusal to change our reasons for living."

"I have always made sure the tengu could stand alone. I am not willing to abandon that." The great tengu shifted, his katana moving to where he could easily grab it. "And I refuse to accept that my death is inevitable."

The sudden rush of killing intent was fair enough warning to a man of Jiyuwan's skill. He quickly kicked over the table, shattering the beautiful tea set against the far wall, then rolled backwards to draw his straight blade. The Great Tengu's draw cut slashed the table in two. Jiyuwan brought his sword up to parry for the head cut, then slashed in response causing the Great Tengu to retreat to the sky.

Then the battle truly began.

Jiyuwan immediately found himself on the defensive, as the Great Tengu used his incredible speed to attack him from all sides. Jiyuwan didn't even try to follow his foe's movements with his eyes. He just allowed his fighting instincts to guide his blade. His foe was air, so he would become earth, unmoving, unyielding.

Still each blow threatened his stance. The Great Tengu was holding his katana in one hand, but the massive strength behind each blow

required all of Jiyuwan's power to counter. It didn't help that Jiyuwan couldn't alter his stance at all, lest the Great Tengu strike him while he was changing footwork.

Then came his opening, the mistake that he'd been waiting for. The tengu paused in his assault to attack with his fan. With a single fluid motion he swung his sword as fast as he could while still retaining the proper angle, then followed the wind pressure cut with 4 throwing arrows.

His cut slammed into the tornado created by the tengu's magic, scattering the winds behind both attacks in a dramatic burst. However, the arrows he threw flew straight and true towards the Great Tengu's chest.

The tengu reacted at the last moment, seeming to disappear as he dodged to the side. There were four solid thumps as the arrows embedded themselves in the wood of the building, and Jiyuwan was afraid for a moment all of them had missed. But the Great Tengu looked down at his right sleeve, and Jiyuwan saw blood starting to spread. The two opponents once again gave each other respectful glances.

Then the Great Tengu jumped up to the wall and pushed himself off with incredible force. Jiyuwan quickly guessed the attack his opponent would have to make and executed the proper parry just in time. He grunted as the force of the impact ran up his arms. He'd have to try more delicate parries if he didn't want his arms to break. This explained why the Great Tengu had been willing to fight him inside. The thick walls allowed his foe to exchange speed for even greater power at whim.

However, Jiyuwan was still confident in victory. His opponent couldn't use feints or change directions well when using that technique, and the set up gave Jiyuwan enough time to reset his stance. When he faced his opponent he could easily defend himself in such a way to make the strongest blows the same as a light rain.

The match would come down to who made a fatal mistake first.

The next few minutes were like standing in the middle of a summer squall. A rain of quick attacks followed by a cascade of thundering blows slammed into his blade, and like a traveler trying to adjust their umbrella, he shifted his footing and blade to make sure that the steel winds didn't break him.

He saw his first opening as the Great Tengu prepared to spring off the ceiling at him. The cut would aim at his left arm, but it would leave the Great Tengu's head unprotected. Youkai resilience wouldn't hold up to a blade through the eye. So when the Great Tengu attacked, he thrust his blade forward, giving no thought to the cut at his arm, neither accepting or denying it.

Jiyuwan was surprised when he felt his blade struck aside. The Great Tengu had managed to abort his attack and block Jiyuwan's. Partially block anyway. His blade had nicked the tengu's forehead, a wound that would bleed and impede his foe's sight slightly.

A good exchange, he noted. He reset his stance and prepared for the next wave of attacks.

His next opening occurred only a minute later as the Great Tengu came in with a powerful stab. Jiyuwan knew that curved blades like the katana could roll past a poorly placed defending sword to turn from a stab to a deadly slash. Which was probably why the Great Tengu was attempting it.

But he also knew that a straight blade, like his own, could catch a curved blade during that roll and send it flying out of the foe's grasp, if the person wielding the straight blade was a master.

He once again pushed himself forward. The two blades crossed, met, locked very briefly, then with a powerful swing Jiyuwan sent the tengu's blade flying. Then it was his turn to get thrown back as the Great Tengu body slammed him.

It was pure instinct that allowed him to block the cut from the Great Tengu's wakizashi. Even then the force of the blow broke his defense and cut into his side. It wasn't enough to pierce his ribs, but it would weaken him slightly.

He needed to retreat before the Great Tengu just beat him to death with kicks and punches. He braced himself, then jumped backwards as hard as he could. There was a horrible screech of metal as he disengaged. He saw when he resumed his stance that his Lunarian blade was notched, and the Great Tengu's wakizashi was cracked from the strain.

Jiyuwan tossed some throwing arrows to keep the Great Tengu from reaching his blade, but his foe didn't move to the blade. The Great Tengu closed his eyes, raised his fan, and called out to the heavens.

And the winds answered.

The miniature hurricane slammed into Jiyuwan and staggered him. The paper screens were uprooted immediately and the tatami was starting to come loose too. He winced as the teapot slammed into his hip, bruising it. He tried cutting the missiles out of the air as they struck at him, but soon everything in the room would become a deadly weapon capable of killing him.

The Great Tengu waved his fan and the winds pick up again. The walls shuddered as the hurricane became a tornado, then the whole building blew apart in the wind.

As a chunk of wall flew towards him Jiyuwan activated the device he'd been saving for this moment.

The weakness of most magical creatures was their reliance on their innate powers. To be fair, that was the weakness of most humans too. Expecting the average tengu to not call on the wind was like expecting a human to not use their thumbs. And usually relying on the winds was a good idea. It was hard to see how a tornado could be a weakness. After all there was no way any human could defend

against a true tornado, aside from "don't get hit by one." Magic could defend against the deadly winds, but Jiyuwan was a poor student of magic. His purpose was to become the perfect swordsman. It wasn't that he disliked magic, he just didn't have time to devote to the study.

Science, however, was something Jiyuwan greatly appreciated. Especially the sciences that made devices that could be mastered quickly. Devices like the shield he was activating now.

He grunted as the wall hit him. The shield protected him from deadly impact, but the sudden acceleration was still disconcerting. Smaller debris that would have just punched right through him simply glanced off.

As soon as he reoriented himself he began pushing against the wall, trying to steer the thing. The shield lasted twenty seconds. After that, the shards of the building would rip him apart.

He pushed and pulled at the wooden panel that had struck him, though he had to admit he was uncertain if he was changing its direction at all. It was impossible to see through the swirling debris.

At fifteen seconds he jumped towards where he thought the Great Tengu was.

Jiyuwan broke into the eye of the storm mere seconds later then he anticipated. He was on the left side, where the blood was interfering with the Great Tengu's vision. When the Great Tengu finally spotted Jiyuwan it was too late to do anything but try to kill Jiyuwan before Jiyuwan killed him.

Unfortunately Jiyuwan's shield still had a second left.

The Great Tengu's sword bounced off the Lunarian device, while Jiyuwan's struck true. The tengu coughed up blood as the sword took him in the lungs. Jiyuwan twisted the blade, then ripped it upward to the Great Tengu's neck to make sure the youkai was dead.

The tornado ended.

Jiyuwan slapped away the few pieces of debris that ended up heading towards him, then looked around. Surrounding him was what he guessed was a great portion of the tengu nation, all looking at him in shock. They were almost all armed, but none made a move against him.

Then a voice cut through the silence. The voice of the wolf tengu that had met him at the door. "The Great Tengu is dead! As per his final commandment, the tengu who slays his assassin will prove their right to become the new Great Tengu!"

Jiyuwan pulled out a second device while raising his sword. "Come then! Prove your worth, but know failure is death!"

Chapter 6

"No plan survives contact with the enemy. "

Shimeri looked down at the map and frowned.

He couldn't say his assault was going badly really. Unfortunately, he couldn't say it was going well either. His army was making slow progress towards Eientei, but every gain of ten yards was followed by a 7 yard retreat.

The problem was his troops. Moon rabbits were stronger, better coordinated and better equipped then their earth rabbit counterparts. The problem was they were still rabbits. While their superior firepower made it easy to break the defenders' ranks, every trap and ambush they ran into caused the whole army to fall back. It would almost be comical, if it weren't for the occasional scream of a wounded or dying rabbit.

He closed his eyes and called upon his power. " *Unit twenty seven, move to reinforce unit twelve. Watch out for mines.* " He opened his eyes and looked around at his personal retinue of moon rabbits. They all seemed to be performing their duties admirably. He was quite proud of his servants. "Any word on casualties Umi?" he asked the closest rabbit.

"Light on both sides. They seem to be more interested in prisoners. The same as us," she replied.

Shimeiri nodded. "Good." He returned to the map.

He wondered if Tenshou would be annoyed that he wasn't keeping to the timetable. Technically Shimeiri wasn't supposed to take Eientei until later, but he didn't want to wait. He knew many of the Lunar nobility would see his move as treason. Which it was.

Shimeiri didn't have any delusions about his status. He saw the purity of the moon was failing long before anyone else did, and to be honest, he liked it. He began to become entranced with the earth. Sure there was the threat of death here, but one had to be able to fall to rise. Thus when Lord Tenshou started plotting his vengeance, Shimeiri had been the first to ally with the man.

And in return for his services Shimeiri had asked something any Lunarian would toss away without a thought. Rule over the earth.

Let the fools who couldn't see their fall from grace sit on the dead rotting moon. He would make himself a king among men. And rabbits. Eientei would be the foundation of his empire.

There was the unfortunate problem of what to do with the current rulers of the mansion of course. He was still working on that. Which is why he was making sure to take as many prisoners as possible. You could always execute people later. It was much more difficult to unexecute someone.

Suddenly a voice came to him. "Um… This is a message to all moon rabbits in the invading army from Princess Kaguya. You have been deceived. Lord Tenshou is the one who assassinated the Watatsukis. Any defectors will be accepted into Eientei, no questions asked."

"Damn!" Shimeiri quickly reached out to his army. *"Ignore that Reisen. She betrayed the emissaries, just like her namesake. How could she have survived an attack the Watatsukis did not? Continue your advance."* He thought for a moment then added. *"Anyone who deserts their post will be executed. Surrender to numbers is only reasonable, treason is not!"* That should keep his troops in line, given the punishments handed out from the previous earth operation.

He turned his attention to his enemies' communications. If he could get a fix on the transmission he could block it with his power, but something was odd about the signal. After a while he realized it was being broadcast from outside his circle.

Shimeiri considered the matter. It was possible that this was some trick of Eirin's but he discarded that idea quickly. If she'd learned how to communicate like the moon rabbits did she'd have been able to bypass his power. No, a moon rabbit had to be transmitting the message in person, and given the way the magic "sounded" it was obviously some sort of relay. He waved at one of his officers. " Kuro, take a squad and move to the North East. The traitor is there."

"Yes sir!" The elite moon rabbit headed off to grab a reserve group.

"Umi, you're in command for now." Shimeiri closed his eyes again and reached towards the relay. His army's weakness was morale. He couldn't let enemy propaganda flood over them at will. But his opponent's weakness was morale as well. He could use that.

The connection opened. " *So, is this the new Reisen or the old one?"*

There was silence, but he continued. " *Perhaps we could negotiate. I'm far more reasonable then the rest of the Lunar Forces. If you surrender I promise not only your life, but the lives of your masters as well."*

" *And how are you going to explain away the murder of my former bosses if we're all still alive?"* A harsh female voice replied. Obviously this was the older Reisen, the one that fled because of the threat of war. He'd heard she had great potential, but no will. Her voice seemed to belay that though.

Still, if nothing else he could distract her from his attack team. *"I don't intend to explain anything. I'll be ruler of Eientei. King of the Rabbits. They won't be able to question me."*

" *With Kaguya as your Queen, I suppose?* " The voice questioned.

" *Officially, yes.* " He sighed mentally as he checked his group's progress. The main advance was at a standstill, but the special squad would catch this Reisen soon. " *You studied under Eirin, right?*

You must be intelligent. Far more intelligent then most of your kind. You should be able to see how reasonable my offer is."

He decided to try appealing to desire instead of fear. *"What do the people of Gensoukyo have to offer you? Even if they weren't going to be wiped out they'll never trust you. All you gain here is death and a little face, when you could own the world. Think on it. I have great need of strong commanders. Especially those who can speak with me and know the Earth rabbits."*

" *I won't betray anyone again. Even if they do dislike me. And I won't ever serve the man who helped murder my comrades from before."* Shimeiri's eyes snapped open in shock at the contempt in her voice. He'd never been treated like that by a moon rabbit before. " *I'd normally let you continue to waste your time, but your troops have arrived, so I'm afraid I have to shoot them."*

He frowned and switched his focus. *"Kuro! She knows you're there! Be careful."*

" *Yes my Lord!"* Came the reply.

Shimeiri sighed and looked around the clearing again. It seemed like Umi was handling the assault direction passably. He checked the other stations, but nothing required his attention.

After a few seconds of pacing he turned his attention back to his ambush party. He closed his eyes and tried to reach Kuro.

There was no sense of contact.

Worried he reached out to the squad that had gone with his assistant. He reached out to the first mind in the area. "Report."

"Aaaah! "

Shimeiri swore. "Umi, contact me if anything changes. I'm going to deal with the traitors myself." He strode off quickly into the bamboo

thicket.

The dark shadows and strange noises of the nighttime forest unnerved him a little as he left the safety of his retinue, but he shook that feeling off. No mere moon rabbit was capable of getting through his defenses, and he'd made sure no other youkai were within his perimeter.

There was the sound of breaking underbrush in front of him and he drew his side arm. "Report!" he snapped out. The rustling stopped briefly, then one of his moon rabbits popped out, a mixture of fear and hope on her face. "The clearing! It was a trap!" she wailed. "There must have been a dozen of them in the forest. They shot Kuro first, and wounded the rest of us. We had to retreat!"

Shimeiri looked over the rabbit and saw a bleeding nick on one ear. At a guess she'd been hit as she was running. Using his knowledge of moon rabbits he guessed that Reisen had shot Kuro from hiding then opened up fire at random just to scare the others. He sighed again at how sad his army was, but one worked with what one had. "Gather the wounded and get back to the doctor. I'll handle it myself."

"Thank you master," she said before hurrying off. She was probably happy that she wasn't going to be blamed for the failure.

He dismissed the rabbit from his thoughts and continued forward, this time more cautiously. He doubted Eirin would give a moon rabbit a weapon capable of breaking top line Lunarian shields with a single hit, but he wasn't willing to bet his life on it.

After a few minutes Shimeiri reached the clearing. Right in front of him was Kuro's body. Her knee had been shot out, and there was a wound right above her nose. In her right hand was a grenade, the pin unpulled. Apparently she'd tried to fight this Reisen despite her wound. It was unfortunate that she'd failed.

He dismissed the corpse from his mind and turned his gaze back to the clearing. He didn't want to break cover, but trying to sneak

around in the bamboo also seemed like a bad plan. He decided to change the battlefield in his favor.

Pulling out a grenade device of his own he twisted the cap, then threw it as far as he could in the forest. A few shots from the far side of the clearing failed to take the missile out and it flew into the bamboo opposite him.

The moon rabbit rolled out into the clearing as the forest behind her exploded into flame.

Shimeiri stepped out and lowered his weapon at her. Before he could pull the trigger however she leaped to her feet and focused her glowing red eyes on him.

The world seemed to melt, swirling and dipping, then boiling up to the top again. The bullets he fired twisted and hopped through the air as his brain whirled. The ground sank beneath his feet, making him stumble as his stomach rebelled. He tried to steady himself and keep his lunch as he continued shooting.

Reisen stood up and started firing into his shield. As the glowing white bullets staggered through the red haze of his vision Shimeiri realized what must be happening. This Reisen must have inherited the powerful madness inducing eyes. His senses were being turned against him.

But two could play that game.

Shimeiri closed his eyes, focused, and screamed into Reisen's mind.

The dizziness lessened a bit, and he could feel the assault on his magical shield slack off. He opened his eyes, just a little, and started shooting as fast as his weapon would allow. Reisen staggered back, grimaced and turned her eyes on him again.

The two stood there for some time, firing drunkenly at each other. Shimeiri couldn't even tell which shots bounced off the shields and

which just missed cleanly.

Finally the rabbit broke and ran. She tried to fly, crashed, then stumbled into the bamboo. As she vanished so did her terrifying mental attack.

The ground was firm again, though Shimeiri's vision still wavered. He allowed himself to collapse to help settle his stomach. He cursed himself for being so overconfident. He wasn't sure who would have won if they'd kept up that exchange.

Fortunately his opponent had made a mistake. She needed to look at an opponent to attack with her power.

He just needed to be close.

Shimeiri focused hard and once again began yelling in the mind of every nearby moon rabbit. After a few moments he followed the trail of his adversary into the thicket. He slowed somewhat when the light of the moon was cut off by the massive bamboo stocks, keeping his ears open for the crunch of footsteps other then his own, but there was nothing but the ringing silence of his mental cry.

After a minute of careful walking he found himself at another clearing. Reisen lay in the middle clutching her ears and twitching. Every now and then she made to stand, then keeled over again.

Shimeiri started forward, then paused. Something wasn't quite right.

Then he saw the fresh dirt and understood. She was lying on the other side of a pit trap. He wasn't sure exactly what was in the pit trap that she thought could hurt him, but he wasn't about to find out either. Fortunately avoiding it was easy. He took to the air and moved forward.

"It's unfortunate you didn't side with me. Getting Princess Kaguya to accept my rule will be more difficult after I kill one of her prize pets. But I'm afraid I can't have someone as dangerous as you giving her

support. That's why I let Eirin 'escape' out into the battlefield where she could get herself killed." He realized his words probably were being drowned out by the mental noise, but he thought explaining himself was the polite thing to do.

"Still with both the 'traitors' dead I should be able to keep Lord Tenshou in the dark for a little longer. So you haven't failed your princess. Much." He came to a stop next to the rabbit and carefully took aim.

A rustling above was the only warning he got before something slammed into his shoulders, knocking him off his feet and into the darkness of the pit.

For a second Reisen had thought that the trap had failed. That Tewi had given up on the illusion spell that prevented real trap from being seen, and abandoned her. It had taken all of her effort to get this far, and her ears were still ringing. She felt miserable and alone as the man had taken aim at her. Then she felt a stab of relief as the earthen bags magically appeared in the sky and struck the Lunarian.

As the impact of the earth ended the pain in her ears subsided and she pushed herself to her knees. She still felt sick though. It didn't help that the pure cacophony had been replaced by frantic cries for help.

Tewi loomed over her. "You all right Reisen? I hope I wasn't cutting it too close with those bags full of rocks."

"Not that. He's still alive. His shields must've protected him."

Tewi's eyes hardened. "Oh. I'll take care of that then." The small earth rabbit summoned up her limited magic and produced a bamboo spear and a wooden mallet. She planted the tip of the weapon into the earth she'd used the bury the Lunarian, then raised the mallet. "Tell me when the noise stops."

The first three swings just drove the spear in deeper. On the forth the spear jerked as it hit something. Reisen shuddered at the demands for aid switched to begging for mercy. Tewi lifted the hammer, once, twice, three times, then four.

And there was silence again.

"That's it," Reisen said weakly.

"Good!" Tewi replied cheerfully. The earth rabbit looked at the spear again and shook her head. "King of the Rabbits huh? Don't even think of claiming that title unless you can survive having your skin ripped off."

Reisen shuddered at Tewi's bold proclamation. It was very rare, but sometimes Reisen got the feeling that Tewi was far stronger then anyone imagined.

But once again she pushed that thought aside. She could ask Eirin about it later. Right now she had something to finish.

Kaguya slowly petted the young rabbit girl's head. Reisen (they'd need to find a good way of distinguishing the two now) had had a panic attack when the invader from the moon started begging for his life in her mind. As had most of the invasion force. The earth rabbits of course were unaffected, so Kaguya's armies were doing their best to take advantage of their foes' confusion.

Reisen twitched in Kaguya's arms, then wiped her eyes. "Ah! Um, princess, the other Reisen said that the enemy general is dead. She and Tewi are safe, though she says she'll have a headache for a week."

Kaguya smiled at the rabbit girl, putting all her charm to work keeping the skittish girl functional. "Good. Tell her to come back home as quick as she can. And tell all the other moon rabbits we offer them total amnesty and will defend them against anyone calling

for vengeance." She patted the girl one more time. "Then take a rest. You've done a very good job."

The second Reisen's ears twitched as she conveyed the message. Kaguya gave the little rabbit another pat on the head, before gently setting her down beside her "guard" retinue. She needed to give her thanks to Udonge and Tewi, and take over rounding up the rest of the moon rabbits. The moon rabbits had been trained for some time to obey Lunarians unquestioningly. And with Reisen and Tewi's plan, she was the only Lunarian around that they could turn to.

And if she hurried she might be able to help with the rest of the war. Eirin might be fine with Kaguya sitting around safely at home, but she wasn't.

She'd see to Eientei's safety. And then she'd show the people who had banished her just how much she'd changed in this beautifully impure world.

Oisha yelled as loud as she could to lessen the pain in her ears from the roar of clashing spells. Her shields were screaming as the magical backlash from her own attack pushed them to the breaking point. The spell's end came as a relief. She didn't even think of pressing her attack, she just flew to a new position and breathed in as much cool air as possible.

Oisha was tossing everything she had into this fight. But Yuuka was matching her, spell for spell.

At least her enemy looked like she was tiring as well. At the start of the battle the youkai had attacked by releasing an aura of deadly power. Her foe didn't seem wounded, but she'd given up on such extravagantly wasteful attacks in favor of more focused magic.

There was no taunt to warn of Yuuka's next attack, just a subtle change in the youkai's posture and a massive amount of magical energy. An orb of space in front of the youkai began to distort,

turning blacker then the night sky. Oisha fought the urge to run and instead devoted her efforts to understanding the spell. Then she recognized it and she dove towards the center of the distortion as fast as she could.

The boundary of the unnatural distortion began to collapse piecemeal, sending deadly fragments of unreality in all directions. Oisha's shields screamed again as the magic washed over them, then she broke through into the center of the field. There were a few stray bullets here, but those were easy to dodge.

The distortion finally shrank small enough that it simply faded out of existence. Oisha struck immediately. "Black Cataclysm." The spell she'd been forming in her mind crystallized immediately into a black orb that streaked towards the youkai. Yuuka only had enough time to look at the attack in shock before it slammed into her with another rattling boom. The youkai vanished in blue flames.

Oisha felt a surge of joy, then shock as the flames parted to reveal an orb of pure energy. Smaller energy spheres detached and blazed towards her, and she quickly dove to the ground to avoid the assault. Her hair stood on end as the attack crackled right overhead.

Oisha's heart sank to her stomach as not one, but two identical youkai reformed. Both the Yuukas wore a mask of determination. The red clad figures both aimed their palms at Oisha before intoning "Dual Spark."

She was in serious trouble. The youkai had been battering her all over the battlefield with unnamed attacks. Any spell that was worthy of a name in Yuuka's mind would be too much for her defenses, and there was no way she could split one of her own attacks to counter. She needed some way to avoid one of the beams. But there was nowhere to hide! None of the hills could shield her from the attack.

Energy began flowing towards the youkai's outstretched hands. Then the answer came to Oisha. It was dangerous. So dangerous that

she'd never even tested the spell. But right now it was the only thing that could save her.

Oisha dispelled her shields. The spell would either work, or she would die. She mustered her courage and turned to the youkai, "I'm ready".

"HAAAAA!" The two Yuukas each unleashed a beam of pure destructive magic unlike anything Oisha had ever seen. But that didn't matter. As the rainbow energy shattered the air itself Oisha called upon her magic, upon years of lore, and recited the simple quick spell that she'd never cast before.

She vanished.

It was startling seeing herself disappear like that. She knew the spell would remove her from reality, but she had no idea what that entailed. Now though she found her consciousness or perhaps her soul, watching as the deadly magical beams vanished into the ether. There was no sound, no sensation of touch, just a strange knowledge of presence and the feeling of power flowing into space.

The beams of destruction ended, leaving the sky empty.

Oisha screamed in shock as she once again entered existence. Every nerve in her body seemed eager to report that it was now working again, and her mind could barely handle the information. But she had to finish the spell. She pointed her hands at both of the women before her and reversed the flow of power. The twin beams sent her reeling back in the air.

The massive attacks blinded her completely. The roar of an attack that was beyond ever her power terrified and thrilled her. This had to be the turning point!

After what seemed like an eternity the magic faded. Oisha saw her foe had once again retreated to an energy state, with no sign of the double. She forced herself to raise her hands again. Her body

screamed as magic flowed through overused channels but she couldn't hold back! She needed to win now!

"Phase Crush!"

A dark purple orb spun out over the battlefield and exploded on top of the youkai. Space-time crackled then broke with a sound that the human mind pretended was similar to glass. Oisha began flying away as the spell began drawing in the surrounding air in a terrifying vortex.

The pull of the spell seemed stronger then normal. Oisha's battered body wanted to collapse, let the wind drag her in. Every moment she slipped a little further. A centimeter given here, because she couldn't overdo it. A meter given because she needed to regather her strength.

It was a relief when the sphere exploded and slammed her into the ground.

There was pain all along her body. Oisha wasn't sure how she made it to the newest crater's edge, but her body told her that she'd hit the ground hard and that she should lie down before things got worse. However she knew she needed to finish off her foe. Otherwise she'd die.

Now that she was mostly conscious, Oisha looked over the crater.

The sides were glossy black. In the middle were some glowing seeds, obviously dormant. That was the only sign of her opponent.

"I won?" Oisha looked again, searching for proof. "I won. I won!"

She laughed aloud. "I did it!" The youkai had to have been a champion! Perhaps even a something equivalent to a native god! And she had struck it down with her own power. "I am the greatest combat mage alive!"

Oisha took a few deep breaths. She felt a little lightheaded. Obviously the fight had taken a great deal out of her. She'd need to take a bit of a break before she could move on.

"Konparo, Konparo."

Oisha froze then turned around quickly. The sudden motion made her vision blur and she crashed to the ground again.

A large doll, or perhaps a small doll youkai, knelt down in front of her. "You are very strong. But poison works on everyone regardless of strength."

Oisha attempted to raise and hand, to summon her magic again, but she was too weak. The doll reached forward and pushed her to a kneeling position.

"You hurt my friend badly for no reason, and you killed Yuuka. I already don't like humans, but you're bad even for them." Oisha opened her mouth to protest, but all she could do was try to breath in more air. The doll continued, "Which is why I don't think I'll let you die by poison. I think we'll end this right now. Okay, Su-san?"

Without waiting for a reply, Medicine snapped the Lunarian's neck.

The doll youkai tossed the broken body aside and looked into the pit, where the glowing sunflower seeds lay. She sighed. Yuuka was such a fool, always getting in fights right after waking up. Still, she was glad to see the other nature youkai had left something behind.

There was a strange sound and a gap appeared next to her. Medicine looked in confusion as Chen stepped out. "Hm? Why don't you use that more often?"

"I can only take myself," Chen said with a certain amount of embarrassment. The nekomata shook it off quickly, however. "Anyway, I ran Kogasa all the way back to the temple like you asked, so she should be safe. Now will you help Ran?"

Medicine nodded. "Sure! These humans seem like a bad lot, so I wanted to kill them anyway. I just don't like abandoning friends." She thought for a moment. "But isn't your master a long ways off? We'll probably have to fight through a lot of people to help her."

Chen nodded with a frown. "Yeah, but hopefully we'll be able to force them to send people to fight us instead of to hunt Ran, Maribel and Renko down."

Medicine smiled and nodded. If Chen said it would work that way Medicine wasn't going to argue. She'd figured out a lot of people were smarter then her by now. She quickly scooped up the glowing seeds and dropped them on more fertile ground before taking to the air. "Alright, which way?"

Chen leaped in front of her. "Follow me!"

"Flames of heaven, come forth onto this world and wreck destruction on my enemies. Royal Flare."

Dinah crouched behind the shelves as Patchouli's attack seared the Library's high ceiling. The second the deadly barrage stopped she popped out and unleashed an unmaking spell at the two Lunarians there. Opposite her Koakuma teleported out and unleashed a barrage of deadly water mines before hiding away again.

A sweeping laser forced her to duck. She swore and retreated further into the maze of books. The fight was in its opening stages, but like a chess master who'd botched an opening, Dinah saw that it was going poorly.

The truth was that Dinah was weak. She could cast spells faster then Patchouli, and she almost matched her mother in spell knowledge, but she was Koakuma's biological daughter, and that meant she just didn't have the same magical power as her sisters. Normally she made up for that by hitting her foes' weaknesses, but the Lunarians they were fighting didn't have weaknesses. All she and Koakuma

could really do was skirmish hoping to catch the Lunarians off guard while Patchouli fought them directly. And since Patchouli didn't have much stamina, that couldn't last.

Koakuma teleported next to her. Dinah could tell from her mother's grim countenance that Koakuma had come to the same realization. "We need to find a way to distract one of them."

Dinah sighed. "Somehow I don't think that'll be easy. They aren't using any magical style I know, we can't brute force those shields and I can't think of any good taunts."

Dinah shivered as Koakuma smiled widely. "Oh! That gives me an idea~." Her mother sighed. "But we should try the normal way first. I'll try to pin the rear guard with a laser, while you see if their spell has a weakness."

"Right." The two teleported out into the air again.

The two Lunarian invaders had driven Patchouli to the back of the Library, though they weren't pressing their attack hard. Dinah was relieved to see that Patchouli had called forth her Philosopher's Stone. The enhancements that spell gave her, physically and magically, would help a lot.

The two devil magicians quickly assessed their targets. The woman was leading the assault, with what looked like custom spells. The man was holding back a bit more, and his spells seemed somewhat generic, though Dinah couldn't place the style. He would be the better target.

Koakuma's laser cut into his shield, turning it blue then white under the attack. The woman turned to send them running again, but Patchouli shattered the crystals that composed her spell, sending a massive storm of multielemental energy at the woman forcing her to dodge. In that brief moment when both their foes were occupied Dinah allowed her vision to focus into the world where magic bound things together.

At first she didn't understand the strange lines that bound the man's shield together; the green and red links of the chain that forced the magic in the air to defend him. Then she remembered something she'd read in one of the outside world books. "Ah. Binary. So this is a magitech device."

To understand was to act. Dinah summoned her magic and unleashed a magnetic pulse through the library.

The device was probably protected against that type of attack, but it didn't matter. Such defenses were never one hundred percent effective, and Dinah had quickly bound the names of some of the nastier gremlins of legend to the spell. Even if the shield survived, it would be plagued by bugs and errors until it was scrapped or purified.

The man managed to dodge out of the way of Koakuma's laser right as his shield shattered into meaningless lights but now he had to flee the deadly beam. The woman, seeing her ally in danger, threw a protection spell on him. The Lunarians' momentum had been lost.

Patchouli took that moment to activate the library's defenses. Dinah and Koakuma both teleported to her side as the Library dissolved into chaos.

Voile had always been heavily warded. First to keep out hunters. Then to protect the books from Marisa. Then, after Marisa moved in, to protect the books from people trying to steal them back from Marisa. At this point no one knew how all the library wards worked.

Elemental spirits screamed into the sky, some attacking foes directly, some just twirling about releasing a rain of destruction. Magical binds stretched and reached for foes to trap. Several innocuous books burst from their shelves and began destructive spells, throwing lasers, arcing lighting and releasing fireblasts into the air. Over the pool a massive column of ice formed. And of course the warding runes on the shelves all reinforced themselves to protect against the random damage being thrown about.

Dinah sat down next to her mother and 'aunt' Patchouli. "I don't think that'll work," she said.

Patchouli nodded. "There's no way they're stupid enough to stay out in the open. But this gives us some time." She began summoning her Philosopher's Stone again.

Koakuma smiled. "And that spell you hit them with should mean they won't be able to rely on their technology as much. We might be able to face them directly now."

"I guess we'll find out." Dinah sighed and reinforced her own spells. This was going to be messy.

About three minutes after all the wards had been triggered, the summons were mostly gone, and the attack spells had all been exhausted. Her mother gave Dinah a hug and Patchouli a kiss, before all three of them took to the sky.

They were greeted by a wave of fire that smashed Dinah's shield and sent Koakuma tumbling backwards. Patchouli allowed her fire stone to absorb the energy that struck her and fling it back. The Lunarians split up and the firefight began again.

The next few moments was a flurry of spellcasting. The female Lunarian and Patchouli targeted each other directly, while Dinah and the others each just attempted to add chaos to the other side of the battle field.

The fight seemed even for a time, but then the crystals of the Philosopher's stone began to shatter one by one as Patchouli's asthma drained away her strength. As the last crystal shattered Dinah found they'd been pushed back to their final spell circle.

The library doors slammed open again as another man ran through it. "Fukuko! Shii! Finish the battle quickly! They have reinforcements!"

Patchouli smiled grimly at that. "Oh, so Remi's finally woken up. About time." She raised her hands. "Dinah. Koakuma. A wall, please." Dinah nodded and began her spell. She prided herself on finishing a second before Patchouli, creating the framework for the massive defensive spell that Patchouli and Koakuma fortified.

The shield appeared in front of them as a opaque demisphere. Parts of it darkened as the Lunarians attempted to overwhelm them with magical power, but they only needed to hold for a few moments.

The library doors exploded off their hinges as two small figures kicked them in. Patchouli swore at the unneeded destruction. "Time to pla~ay," Flandre said as she strode over the wreckage. Remilia just smiled wickedly. Dinah saw Juri step in behind the two. Her sister's wounds worried her, but Juri was obviously still capable of fighting to some degree.

The tables had turned.

Dinah felt the Lunarian's weather spell before the first cloud appeared. It was a good plan, using rain to kill off the vampires quickly, one that had to be stopped. She gathered energy around her and turned it into a focused healing spell that she tossed at her half sister. "Catch!" Juri accepted the power without comment, focusing on rapidly chanting the counterspell to the rain. The clouds formed and gathered, but nothing happened.

Remilia and Flandre ignored the magical battle that could have killed them instantly and just leaped to the attack. The two sisters jumped from bookshelf to bookshelf at blinding speeds, easily dodging the rain of magical bullets aimed at them. As they reached the halfway point the Lunarian who had just burst in dashed quickly backwards, but the man who had entered the library earlier didn't seem to understand his danger and stuck around for a few last shots.

In an instant the sisters were upon him, each grabbing an arm. Dinah looked away as the two inhumanly strong vampires flew in opposite directions. There was a ripping sound, then a long terrifying

scream, then a meaty crunch following by childish laughter. Dinah shuddered. Even those with devil's blood feared laughter like that.

Unfortunately fear only seemed to galvanize their foes. "Fukiko! Purge them all!" the newest intruder yelled. The woman nodded and held up a talisman Dinah couldn't read.

There was a black flash followed by a blinding white one. Dinah's stomach lurched and she grabbed a nearby shelf for balance.

Her eyes cleared just in time to see the woman drop to the ground, unconscious or dead.

As everyone else stared in confused silence Patchouli turned towards Koakuma. "Why did you use our escape spell?"

Then everything fell into place. "Oh, you activated the plane shift spell. That's why things feel different."

The two vampires looked at them in shock. "Huh!"

"You, you demons! I don't know what horrible things you're planning but you won't take me alive!" The Lunarian pulled out a small orb, then stiffened and coughed up blood as nine swords slammed through his body.

"Fair enough." A maid radiating demonic power phased through one of the walls. "Now would someone care to explain why your mansion materialized on top of Lady Shinki's irises," Yumeko said as she stepped over the body.

"Makai! Why is my mansion in Makai?" Remi snapped. "I just woke up. I don't need these troubles."

"Your mansion, sister?" Flandre asked.

Patchouli sighed. "We had an escape plan in case the Lunarians decided to throw their whole army against us at once. I recreated the ritual we used to get to Gensoukyo but with Alice's help I changed

the target to Makai. It was our fallback plan." She turned back. "But we were winning."

Dinah coughed. "I believe the reason was to save your lives. That was a banishment spell wasn't it mother?"

Koakuma nodded and smiled. "Yep! It would have tossed all of us devils off to some horrible place, at the cost of the casters life energy. But you can't banish devils in Makai so…"

Patchouli nodded. "Clever thinking Koa." She coughed. "Still we should look into getting back if possible. We might still be able to change the battle."

Juri nodded. "Besides, mother and father are still out there."

Dinah saw the worry in her half sister's eyes. A worry she shared.

Yumeko frowned and sighed. "And I suppose you'll want Lady Shinki's power to help you get back. Well I can ask her for you. But I fear there will still be some delays. Quick transportation between dimensions is bad for the surrounding space."

"It'll have to do."

Chapter 7

" It is the living that cry for vengeance . "

Renko squeezed Maribel's hand as they flew through the night. She wanted to stop and talk to Mary about what had happened, but there was no time. Every second brought their pursuers closer, so she forced her gaze to the sky like Ran had told her to.

Still she could try to get in a few words. "Is your head still hurting?"

"Not much," Mary replied. There was a pause. "I don't feel good though."

Renko looked back. Maribel didn't look like she was in pain, but her expression was still haunted. Renko lightly squeezed her hand. "This isn't your fault Mary. Don't let it eat at you."

"I know it isn't my fault, but I shouldn't want to kill them either right? People aren't supposed to want to kill others, right?" Maribel's voice trembled. "It's wrong to think that he should have suffered more for what he did, right?"

"Mary, snap out of it!" Renko sighed in relief as her friend snapped back to reality. "You shouldn't feel guilty for being angry. Just don't let it control your actions, okay?" Renko gave her friend's hand another squeeze before turning back towards the sky. "You did everything you could and then some to protect yourself. And me. You didn't do anything wrong."

Renko heard Maribel give a ragged sigh from behind her. "I… I guess. I just wish there was some boundary I could manipulate to find the answers to this madness. I don't know where I am anymore…" The strain in Mary's voice tore at Renko's heart.

"I'm here with you, so don't worry," Renko replied. "I promise that I'll-"

The attack came from nowhere. Renko barely had time to shield Mary with her body before it hit. Fortunately the blow was glancing, so all she'd get was a bruise from it. She heard Ran call out "Princess Tenko!" and the sky brightened behind her. The kitsune must have been using a flashy spell to give them time to recover.

Maribel's eyes were unfocused, seeming simply to stare into space. "Are you alright Mary?" Renko asked as she gave her friend a shake. Maybe the impact had stunned her friend.

Mary seemed to recover a bit. "I'm fine." Maribel took a deep breath and then slowly faded, becoming more and more transparent. Renko panicked as Mary slipped through her hands but a weak chuckle from her friend helped mollify her a bit. "There, I'll be safe. I don't know how much I can help though. Sorry."

Renko nodded. "Don't worry Mary. I'll handle it." She moved to kiss Mary on the forhead, then stopped as she realized the fading trick would make that impossible. She settled for simply stating "I'll be back soon."

Renko turned and launched herself into the air at an angle to draw fire away from her friend. There were three Lunarians in this group, all female. Two were being tied up by Ran, one turned to stop her from interfering. Hopefully this woman was the weakest of the three.

"Well let's see if Marisa was right about ' *sturm und drang* '," Renko said as she pulled out the mini hakkero. "Stardust Memory!"

Renko's first giant star bullet was ludicrous looking, which worked in her favor as the Lunarian foolishly tried to absorb the blast with her shields. Renko didn't break the woman's ward, but the impact sent the Lunarian tumbling and allowed Renko to follow up with a blast of smaller bullets.

The Lunarian scrambled out of the way then fired back a simple blast of raw energy. Renko had no trouble dodging while continuing her

barrage. Her target jumped to the sky to try to get some maneuverability, and Renko followed.

The next few minutes of dogfighting seemed to blur together. Renko quickly realized she was a superior combatant. The woman mostly stuck to single blasts of energy and quick binding spells, attacks that were sure to break Renko's shield, but which were incredibly easy to dodge. Renko on the other hand found herself easily outmaneuvering her foe and laying down patterns that relentlessly chewed at the woman's shields. Her teachers had drilled into her that powerful attacks were a great way to finish things fast, but once a real battle had started it was best to use consistent fire.

Unfortunately it was becoming obvious that her opponent was vastly more powerful. The long haired woman could weather a sustained barrage from Renko for long enough to toss out a focused blast that forced Renko to take cover, then dodge for a little while to regain most of her strength. Renko was fairly certain that the Lunarian would tire first, but the battle would take a long while.

Renko's thoughts were interrupted by the world doing dark. She immediately cast the spell that allowed her eyes to see in infrared, thanking her lucky stars that she'd spent a lot of time working on vision related spells because of her eyes' innate powers. As her vision shifted she saw the Lunarian weaving a complex trap spell and she rapidly dashed past the woman while tossing up a counter spell. The Lunarian swore and they returned to the dog fight.

Still Renko was now worried. Her opponent probably knew more spells then she did. If Renko kept trying to wear the woman down, eventually her foe might get lucky and find a trick Renko couldn't counter. Renko needed to find a way to pop that shield and strike her foe directly. Fast.

The thought stuck in Renko's mind. 'Pop the shield.'

A vision of Flandre Scarlet's fist closing and a table 'popping' flashed through her mind.

Renko fired off another ludicrous star bullet to buy herself some time. As the Lunarian dodged the attack Renko turned her energy inward, focusing on her mind, and the optic nerves that connected them.

Everything had a center. A point that connected all the parts, all the cells, every atom that bound the object together. To find an object's center was a simple spell, because everything tied back to it. All Renko had to do was make her mind understand that so she could see it. And that would take just a little magical manipulation.

Renko closed her eyes as a stab of pain shot through her head. This was normal. She was changing her brain, of course it would hurt. The spell completed and the pain turned into a constant throb instead of a stabbing agony. That was a good sign. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

She could see the points. They were everywhere, on everything. The point of tension. The part where everything was in balance, what everything was pulling at. It would be easy to destroy that point and watch everything pull apart.

A near miss from a cloud of deadly gas brought Renko back to reality. She did her best to ignore the headache, and to focus on the battle. She dodged and weaved through the Lunarian's attack, while trying to think of a way to use the trick she'd just figured out.

Flandre could draw the point of tension to her hand in order to attack it. That was the real strength of her power. Renko didn't have that ability, which meant to take advantage of the points she'd need to target the point directly with her magic. Of course that was impossible. The entire point of magical shield was to prevent people from just summoning knives in your lungs. She needed a way to bypass that first.

Her hand found the knife that Ran had given her. That might get her through the shield, if the enchantment was still working. All she needed to do was close the distance then. And she had the perfect spell for that.

Renko pointed the Hakerro behind her. "Blazing Star!"

The magical blast wasn't anything compared to Marisa's, but it was still enough to send Renko flying towards the Lunarian. The woman's green eyes widened and she dove to the side to avoid the charge. Renko desperately reached towards her foe with the knife, and was rewarded with a tug that nearly ripped the weapon from her hands.

She skidded to a stop and looked carefully at the blade. It was difficult to see in the light, but the very tip of the blade was coated lightly with blood.

The Lunarian raised a hand to summon some magical attack against Renko, but the young magician of the outside world ignored it. Instead she focused on the blood, calling upon one of the most basic tricks in a witch's arsenal.

Fetishes like blood or hair allowed a magic to affect a target any distance away, even through many wards and defenses. The downside was that the links were weak, especially if there wasn't an elaborate ritual used in the gathering, or the items weren't freely given. Blood was one of the stronger fetishes, but even a master magician like Alice would be hard pressed to do more then give someone the magical equivalent of a slap. Renko would be lucky to be able to muster up more then a pinprick.

But Renko was targeting something that was already at it's limit.

Renko's altered eyes could see the tiny magical bullet she conjured strike the point of tension. The Lunarian didn't even notice at first, as the point seemed to grow and expand. Then the woman screamed as the hole that Renko had put in the dot became visable. It expanded, faster and faster, as the woman's body tried and failed to regain equilibrium over the tensions pulling it apart.

There was a final mournful wail, then a stomach churning splatter. Renko snapped her eyes shut and dispelled the enchantments she'd

placed on her eyes. That was a mistake, as the white hot relief snapping through her brain almost caused her to pass out.

She recovered only to find herself face down in a sticky coppery pool. Her stomach twisted and churned and barely had time to push herself off the ground before she vomited.

She felt strong hands pulling her up. "Here," said Ran as the kitsune wiped the blood and viscera off her face. Renko shuddered but didn't resist.

When Ran was done cleaning she tossed the rag she'd used away. "I got one myself," she said pointing to bloodstains on her sleeve, "but one got away. Do you think you can keep moving?"

Renko blinked at the question. She knew she'd killed someone, somewhere in her mind, but it seemed distant, unreal. She nodded at Ran's question. "I'll be okay for now. Mary's got it worse." She turned and ran towards where her friend had been taking cover. Hopefully, Maribel had been spared watching that scene. And hopefully Renko could shake her out of her depression.

I wish there was some boundary of knowledge I could twist to understand what was happening. And what we need to do.

Maribel's vision swam in a sea of shadows.

" *Ha! Do you think a youkai such as myself would bow before you!"*

" *I did good on my History test, so can we go to Disneyworld?"*

" *The plan will come to fruition, even if it costs me my life."*

" *How about we form our own club Renko? One that looks for the true world."*

" *I will have my vengeance on you! On all of you!"*

" *Why? Why did you do this?"*

" *Why did you have to die?"*

" *Who am I?"*

Maribel looked to the sky and saw them there. The watcher and the dragon.

And she understood.

"Maribel are you okay?" Maribel looked up as Renko ran over. The other woman was covered in blood, but Merry could see no signs of injury.

"I'm okay." Maribel stood up. "Hey Renko, what do your eyes see?"

Renko frowned then looked up. "It's 11:37. Why are you asking, Mary?"

Maribel just chuckled. "No reason." It didn't really matter if Renko couldn't see it. It didn't really matter at all. She hugged her lover close.

Then she surrendered to the pull of fate.

"We need to go this way, Ran. Renko." She looked towards where her enemy was hiding.

"Soon we'll finish this."

Shoutoku flew past several chunks of asphalt, then ran across the face of a building before jumping towards the oni. Her blade lashed out once again only to be met by the oni's chains. The small oni braced herself in the air then pushed back against the Lunarian's naginata, sending Shoutoku flying backwards.

Suika followed the parry with a series of boulders. The Lunarian didn't try to dodge them with her own skill and simply allowed the fake black hole to draw her in, using the momentum to slingshot herself around into the debris field again. As she flew past the oni's platform she tossed down two magical grenades. The explosions sent Suika scrambling in another direction.

Shoutoku wanted to press her advantage, but she was caught in the gravity well. She allowed the black hole to pull her to the opposite side, then used her own flight powers to alight on the face of one of the few buildings that hadn't been ripped apart.

She took the moment to wipe her brow and reinforce her shields. The battlefield had made it easy for her to slip in and out of melee, but it also prevented her from following up on advantages. She wasn't sure who was getting the better of it.

Two blindingly white orbs broke her out of her reverie. She jumped away from the building as the missiles slammed into it, punching holes in the framework. As the building slowly began to collapse Suika jumped out of the debris field, her arm summoning the broken concrete and melted office supplies to form another deadly missile.

Shoutoku's first impulse was to flee, but as she looked at Suika the flames of her rage shot up again. Instead she pointed her left hand at the oni and began gathering the power for a spell. As Suika hurled the boulder at her Shoutoku let loose her power. "Searing Lance!"

The beam of flame smashed into the rock blasting it back into pieces. Shoutoku leaped forward again, guided by her hate. Once again her naginata slammed into Suika's shackles. She pressed forward with a kick that the oni mostly ignored while she shifted her grip on her weapon. As the oni counter attacked she blocked with the butt of her spear then went for a snap cut at the oni's head. Suika blocked again and lashed out with an uppercut. Shoutoku sidestepped the driving blow and countered with a sweep.

The blow hit the oni but Suika just went with the attack, allowing her body to get twisted in the air until her horns were facing Shotoku, then flying forward. Shoutoku dashed backward, pulling a desk out of its orbit to block Suika's attack. Suika destroyed it with a flip, then continued the press.

The two combatants exchanged a series of ringing blows before the oni shifted tactics and swung at Shoutoku's spear. Her vision blurred and her stomach lurched, but she spun with the blow, trying to use the oni's own power against her. There was a loud crash and a painful jolt through her arms and side as Suika somehow blocked the strike, but Shoutoku could see the oni had been knocked back as well. She used all her strength to bring her naginata down on the oni's head.

Shoutoku was surprised as Suika simply spun in place. The oni's horns slapped her overhead cut away. Then there was another jolt of pain and Shoutoku was spinning again, her vision obscured by the bright blue flash of her wards trying to bleed off energy.

"Fuck!" Shoutoku called on her power to stop her flight then shook her head to clear it. She looked around expecting the little oni to be flying in for the kill, but a floor from an office building had drifted between them. She took the time to steady her breathing and reset her grip. She wanted to finish this.

When the building drifted away again her father's killer was still standing there. Shoutoku growled and leaped forward.

Suika raised her hands and a ball of flame formed. The oni spent a few seconds increasing the size of the missile, then tossed it straight at her.

Shoutoku didn't deviate from her path. This was her chance.

As the missile exploded she pushed her speed to the limit. Her shields whined, then collapsed as she flew into the explosion. The

flames blinded her and seared her flesh but she forced herself to keep moving forward. To keep charging. She had to end this now!

There was a jarring impact and the sound of tearing flesh. The sudden stop nearly ripped the blade from Shoutoku's hands. Silence fell as she slowly opened her eyes.

Her father's naginata, the weapon she had trained with constantly since his death, was buried in the chest of Suika Ibuki. The great deva of the mountain's hands were holding the spear back, but it the blade had still pierced almost all the way through the oni's slight chest.

Suika smiled at Shoutoku. "Heh. Well struck." She twisted the naginata, shattering the weapon and ripping the tear in her heart wider. Shoutoku watched as the oni's lifeblood poured out. "You've earned your vengeance." The oni's eye's began to lose focus, and the swirling darkness of the fake black hole began to dissipate.

Suika took a deep breath and shut her eyes. "Hey Yuugi. There really was a human who could beat us fair and square."

The mighty deva of the mountain ripped the spearhead from her chest, then fell from the sky.

Shoutoku could only stare as her most hated foe, the monster she'd spent centuries of her life plotting to kill, struck the ground. And with that the black hole completely vanished. The swirling debris, the battleground she'd created with the destruction of humanity, slowly collapsed to the ground. The first large chunk sent up a cloud of concrete dust, obscuring the impact of the rest.

As each rock fell the hatred in her heart ebbed a little more. When the rumble of collapsing masonry finished and the dust cloud receded Shoutoku found herself hovering over the ruins that had become the cairn of the deva of the mountain empty of emotion.

Bereft of purpose she floated down to the foot of the pile. It was almost as seven hundred years of her life was buried there as well.

"Well are you happy?"

Shoutoku flinched from the scorn in those words, before looking up towards the speaker. The woman in celestial raiments was floating there looking down on her with hatred. Shoutoku hadn't noticed before, but the aura of this woman wasn't that of a youkai. A true celestial stood before her.

The woman pointed a crimson sword at her breast. "Answer me. Are you happy? Was your revenge worth the lives of billions? Was it worth the death of your civilization?" The woman's voice broke, "Was it worth killing my friend?"

Shoutoku closed her eyes. "No. But I did it anyway."

"You make me sick."

Shoutoku nodded. There was only one proper way to end this. She drew a knife. "I understand. If you wish to take my life that is your right. Either way, I will have atoned for my crimes." She placed the knife under her throat and steeled herself for what she must do next.

The knife was wrenched violently out of her hands. She gasped in shock and opened her eyes just as the celestial's fist struck her in the face. The blow slammed her back to the ground and sent her head ringing.

"You spineless bitch." The celestial snarled. She looked at the knife in contempt before snapping it with her fingers. "Did you think that you could cause all this damage, ruin this many lives and then just kill yourself and run off to the netherworld to escape your responsibilities?" Shoutoku found herself helpless as the celestial grabbed her shirt and pulled her face to face.

"I am Tenshi Hinanai, and by my order you will not die until all the works of your fellow man that you destroyed on your quest for vengeance have been rebuilt." Tenshi's voice was calm now, but it seemed to reverberate through the very fabric of reality itself. "You will aid the needy with no thought to yourself, you will feed the hungry even if you starve, and you will work to rebuild even if you have no shelter. Only when your task is complete will you stand before the yama. This is Heaven's Mercy."

Shoutoku shivered as the curse was pronounced. Then she closed her eyes, resigned to her sentence. "Truly, Heaven's Mercy is more terrifying then Hell's Justice."

Tenshi let go and turned away. "Just be glad Suika would be furious with me if I punished anyone for killing her in a fair fight."

Shoutoku looked away from the celestial. She recognized the pain in the woman's words, a mirror of the pain she felt when she'd heard about her father's death. Her eyes once again fixed upon the shattered city, purged of life and tears finally began to form in her eyes. "Oh father…" She collapsed to the ground and started to sob. "What have I done to your name?"

Akiyoshi looked in awe at the Netherworld. The strange impure world of Earth had startled him with its chaos when he first arrived. The riot of living things each struggling to claim a place was something he wasn't familiar with. He knew it was wrong to judge Earthlings so harshly, but the realities of impure life just seemed wrong to him.

However the Netherworld was different. Much different. The massive sealed gate held a timelessness and majesty that rivaled the Lunar Capitol. But even more impressive was the garden behind.

The moon had no seasons. It was separate from time, and the cycle of life and death had no place there. The Lunarians had spared no effort to add the illusions of seasons in their pure world of course. But the autumn that Akiyoshi looked down on was real. The leaves

were dying and scattering, yet he could feel it was just as pure as his home. Perhaps more so.

A flash of light from one of the battles behind him brought him back to reality. He forced himself to focus on the gate. Guarding it was a meaningless gesture, but that made it all the more important that he didn't fail.

He'd need to have a clean record when he challenged Lord Tenshou after all. Without that, any evidence he had would be ignored.

A flicker of movement from within the garden caught his eye. A second later he drew his blade. Whatever it was, it was moving towards the gate, and fast!

The streak of light blazed through the trees at a speed Akiyoshi's trained eye's could barely follow. He prepared himself as it started to rise towards the gate, then the figure slowed and stopped revealing a young girl a few inches taller then him, with short silver hair and blue eyes.

The young woman had two swords, though only one of them was drawn, and Akiyoshi could tell from her stance that she knew how to use them well. Behind her trailed a pure soul, perhaps a relative of hers? Had he interrupted a young warrior attempting to recover a lost soul, or perhaps someone wishing to speak to their loved one one last time before they reincarnated? What poor luck for both of them. Still perhaps this could be solved with diplomacy.

"I'm sorry but I can not let anyone leave the netherworld this night." Akiyoshi held his sword at the ready. "I request you wait a little longer before finishing your escape. I promise that no harm will come to you from myself or any other if you stay here."

"Escape?" The girl looked at him like he was mad as she shifted into her own stance. "I am Youmi Konpaku, half ghost gardener of the Netherworld and assistant to Lady Yuyuko, ruler of this realm. Who are you to say I can't leave through my own front door?"

"Konpaku?" Akiyoshi frowned. He'd never heard any legends about a gardener of the Netherworld, much less about half ghosts. Still he responded, "I am Akiyoshi Tsaiho, swordsman of the Lunar Capitol, son of Jiyuwan. I have sworn that no one, living or dead, shall pass these gates in either direction."

Youmi's eyes narrowed slightly at that, and she smiled grimly. "Lunarian swordsman? Well it seems I found my first opponent then." In a flash she drew her second blade. "The things that can't be cut by my blades are almost none!" Then she was upon him, twin blades flashing at speeds rivaling the fastest bullets.

Akiyoshi swept the first two cuts away with a large circular parry as he drew his scabbard into his off hand. He used that to guide Youmi's sword past him while he cut across at her eyes. She ducked under the blow and kicked out at his legs, forcing him to hop backwards. The two paused and reset their stances, while looking for openings.

While the action was paused Akiyoshi took a moment to twist his scabbard's tie around his hand. He'd need the extra grip to use it as a weapon. As he finished he noticed Youmi was still working on perfecting her balance.

He nodded to himself. She was slightly behind him in mastery of the sword. Her technique was almost perfect, but she was too focused on perfecting that technique. She wouldn't deliberately use flawed techniques to take advantage of openings. It also seemed like her speed was reduced here in the air, though that was just a guess.

He knew the way his father would fight, using that perfection against his opponent by switching to dirty moves when the moment was right. But he hesitated. His father's philosophy had failed. Did he really wish to follow that path? He looked his opponent in the eyes, and he saw only a purity of purpose.

He nodded, then shifted his stance again. He would defeat his foe with straightforward attacks, even if it pushed his skills to the limit.

He switched his stance, pointing both his scabbard and sword at Youmi's eyes. "Steel Eclipse."

The woman's eyes widened. Declaring your school's techniques in advance was a foolish move, but it was also difficult to resist such a bold challenge. Youmi didn't even seem to hesitate, resheathing both her blades, and dipping down into a draw cut stance. "Human Sign : Slash of Present!"

Youmi moved first, lowering her stance a fraction of a centimeter before disappearing. Akiyoshi threw himself into his own attack, hoping that he could keep up with the young woman's godly speed. He once again swung his sword in a massive circular parry which swept the iai cut right over his head. As he moved past the half ghost he swept his scabbard at her head releasing his hold at the last second to increase the improvised club's range. He swore for a moment that he saw Youmi's face freeze in shock. Then something hit him in the ribs and sent him flying back.

He recovered his stance quickly enough to see the strange soul that had been following Youmi returning to her side. He cursed himself for being a fool. She'd called herself a half ghost. It had been a mistake to believe she couldn't control both parts of her body. Fortunately from the way she was testing her shoulder he'd struck her as well.

"You're good," she said while taking up a two handed grip on her longer blade. "Enlightened Sword : Rise From Delusion." Akiyoshi couldn't see any difference between this and a normal kenjitsu stance, but he could feel energy building.

He switched his stance as well lowering his blade. "Third technique, racing the thunder."

Youmi stepped forward and raised her sword. The blade seemed to triple in size as green energy flowed into it, then it came crashing down. Akiyoshi forced himself to remain calm and stepped into the attack raising his sword up to the heavens. The two swords touched flat to flat, and with a flick of his wrist he shifted the impact of the

deadly overhead slash to directly beside him. Metal grated as he charged forward with his own overhead cut.

However he was too far away. Youmi had recovered from her attack and dispersed the energy blade before he reached her. She parried his attack easily and lashed out with a kick. He blocked with his leg before flipping over her. She simply dashed forward to avoid his follow up cut, ending this exchange in another draw.

Akiyoshi flipped his sword parallel to the ground at eye level. If they were using magic he had a few tricks of his own. His father had never learned the arts, but his mother's side of the family had been skilled magicians. He'd incorporated some of the more useful invocations into his swordplay. "Wind Cutting Stab."

Youmi resheathed her blade again. "Ascension to Nirvana." She was obviously waiting.

He accepted the invitation and leaped forward. As he flew he invoked the wind, and his blade began to cut the air, leaving deadly contrails to either side. No matter how the young woman tried to dodge she'd be faced with his attack.

But she didn't dodge. She waited until he was almost in front of her, then placed her hands on both her swords. There was a blurred movement, and a massive flash of bright pink energy exploded beneath him. Akiyoshi immediately abandoned his attack and went into another forward flip over the half ghost's head.

However he wasn't about to sacrifice the attack just yet. He called on the unused power of the wind, then made three quick cuts at Youmi as he flew away. The magic in his sword flew off as air pressure cuts as he flew backwards.

Youmi turned to face him and spun her blades in a circle. The mirrored steel wall sent the first wind blast reflecting back into the second. Then she brought her blades down in a hard X slash that dissipated the third in a flash of green energy.

When the energy cleared Akiyoshi saw that she was smiling, as if she had no cares in the world. He wondered briefly if she had some trick that he hadn't been expecting, but he didn't see any deceit in her eyes, just calm acceptance, and a lack of tension. It was strange, and somehow familiar. Then she noticed his appraising glance and blinked in surprise. Akiyohsi shook off the odd feeling as well. He had a battle to finish.

Youmi pointed her blade at him then flipped it back into a low aggressive stance. "Sword of Cycles."

Akiyoshi considered the attack for a moment, then set his blade loosely. "The World is Empty."

Youmi charged forward towards him, then began a series of rapid full moon circle cuts. Akiyoshi was impressed at how seamlessly they flowed into each other, but he didn't hesitate. As the woman's blade reached his head height he dashed forward and threw his sword at her feet. The blade flew to 'ground' level then stuck into a rune that formed in the air. The sudden hesitation caused by obstacle to her footwork was all the time he needed. He stepped forward inside her range, caught her wrist and sent her flying with a disarming throw.

He quickly grabbed his blade and moved to catch her weapon. He'd almost reached it when Youmi righted herself and appeared several yards away, holding the blade. Akiyoshi's eyes narrowed. He'd suspected it earlier, but now he understood his opponent's secret power.

With that knowledge he knew the attack that might win him this battle. He flew up into the air, making the wind up for his attack perfectly obvious. "Strike from Above Heaven."

The half ghost held her blade out to defend herself. "Slash Clearing the Six Senses"

Akiyoshi pulled back his straight bladed sword then dived down on the young woman sword leading. She gave the attack a hard parry

then she and her ghost half seemed to split into threes, each becoming a semi solid woman running around Akiyoshi.

He didn't pay it that much attention though. Instead he continued pouring energy into the sword, focusing on the rune beneath him that would act as the 'ground' for this attack.

The six clones of Youmi attacked as one, each with a perfect slash that left an energy trail like a cherry blossom petal. A second before the blades impacted Akiyoshi stabbed his sword into the rune, and the world exploded in light.

The young woman's cry of pain and surprise came from above to his surprise. Still in the end it didn't matter. When the flash had cleared from his eyes he dashed up to where the woman was attempting to recover and placed the point of his blade at her neck. "Yield."

She froze, then looked at him in surprise, "Why?"

That was a good question. "The same reason you didn't kill me using your time stop abilities," he finally replied.

"But, if you know about those, then you know that I can escape at any point," she protested.

"But you haven't," he pointed out.

"Oh, Youmi, Youmi. You really need to work on your conversational skills. If you'd been a little more talkative you could have probably wormed your way past this one without a fight." The two combatants turned to see a ghostly woman in fine robes floating up towards them. "Young man, you can stay your blade. I am Yuyuko Saigyouji, Youmi's master. She will not be trying to pass the gate anymore, so you need not battle."

Akiyoshi took a step back. "I, Akiyoshi Tsaiho, accept your word. I apologize for being so rudely confrontational."

Youmi sheathed her blade, but her face was still troubled. "Lady Yuyuko, the fighting's still going on!"

Yuyuko's smile weakened. "Youmi, I can't let you go out into Gensoukyo right now."

"But, but what about all your friends? What about Ran, and Maribel and Renko?" Youmi cried out. "You can't just abandon them! They might die without my help!"

Akiyoshi's gut twisted at Youmi's plea. He hadn't thought about what keeping this woman from the battle might do. Had his actions led to the death of more innocents?

Yuyuko sighed, and her smile faded completely. "I know Youmi, but Gensoukyo isn't going to be safe for you." She looked at Akiyoshi, causing him to start. "Or you either young Lunarian. I finally figured out what Yukari's plan is." Yuyuko looked up at the sky. "And no pure ghost in Gensoukyo will be safe."

"While I appreciate your friendliness towards me, I'm not a ghost." Akiyoshi said lightly. He bowed. "I will not intrude on your domain any more. After all I can guard just as well on the other side of the gate."

"Ah, don't you know little Lunarian, you're in the Netherworld." Yuyuko's smile returned, but this one had a harsher edge. "For a mortal, being in the Netherworld is the same as being dead." She opened her fan. "Of course some deaths can be more permanent then others. If you accept my hospitality I'm sure you'll only end up half dead, at most."

Akiyoshi considered the matter then sheathed his blade and bowed to Youmi. "I appreciated the match, and I apologize for not talking things out with you first."

Youmi smiled and shrugged. "It was a good match. And I struck first."

"Now now Youmi, don't dawdle, you need to go get some tea ready for our guest. And some snacks for me." Yuyuko waved her fan. "And bring them back here. Our guest still technically needs to guard the place, even if no one is going in or out."

"Right!" Youmi shrugged, then disappeared in a flash, running back into the Netherworld.

After she'd vanished from sight Akiyoshi turned back towards Gensoukyo with concern. What was happening out there? And what would scare a ghost away?

He felt a chill as Yuyuko floated up next to him. The ghost hid her face behind her fan, but her eyes were fixed on him. It was unnerving.

After a moment he said. "Er, I'm sorry for tying to kill your servant."

The ghostly woman chuckled. "Oh I'm not upset about that. I'm just enjoying the fact that you've returned here. Akiyoshi blinked and waited for the woman to explain, but she just laughed. "In any case I would appreciate it if you continued to refrain from killing little Youmi." She giggled, then leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Though if you ask her nicely first, a few little deaths might be okay…"

Akiyoshi felt himself flush at that. "What! That! Why?"

He began to worry as Yuyuko laughed. "Oh my. It's been far too long since I've gotten to tease you. I'm glad it still such grand fun."

Akiyoshi shook his head and turned his attention back towards the lands of Gensoukyo. It seemed this strange ghost woman was determined to have fun at his expense. Though he had to admit, worrying about her antics was better then worrying about what was occurring out there.

Especially since he could do nothing about either.

Chapter 8

" Have faith in the Lord, but keep your powder dry . "

Eirin leaped away from the missile. The tiny mote of flame exploded among the bamboo she'd been hiding among. She grunted in pain as shrapnel from the blast hit her back. She hadn't been able to recover her wards since they'd last been dispelled.

"Ahahaha! Still running? How many more arrows do you even have Eirin?" Eirin ignored Suri's taunting and began looking for a rock to use as cover. "Surely you don't think you have enough to disable me? I haven't even worked through half of my painkillers yet."

Eirin tossed a mine behind her and slowed her running just enough to get a weak shield up. Then she drew another arrow and waited for her foe. As soon as the woman came into view Eirin let loose.

Suri causally burned the arrow out of the air. "Really?" Suri smiled then frowned and looked down at the ground. "A mine? Why would you even bother with these?"

Eirin closed her eyes. "Because they're flash bangs." She used a quick spell to release the radio wave that triggered the mine. As Suri screamed in rage she fired four arrows in rapid succession into the Lunarian. She spun to flee to her next ambush point, then froze. Before her was a line of magical explosives, Suri's own minefield. "I guess my luck's run out," she muttered. She turned back to her foe, drawing another arrow.

Erin's shot was true, but the other Lunarian batted it aside with a snarl. Suri pointed and Eirin felt her shield collapse again. Then static electricity started to build around her and she realized she was in deeper trouble. Lightning was difficult to dodge for someone with human reflexes. Resigned to her fate Eirin drew another arrow.

"Master Spark."

Eirin closed her eyes and hit the ground, the natural reaction for anyone in Gensoukyo who heard those words unexpectedly.

Even with her eyes closed the flash was impressive. Apparently Marisa had been increasing her power even without Gensoukyo's constant battles. Eirin made a mental note to reconsider her contingencies for a conflict with the Scarlet Devil Mansion if she survived this.

When the roar of the spell stopped Eirin jumped to her feet and began looking for Suri. She couldn't find her foe anywhere, but Marisa had stepped into the clearing her blast had formed. The magician looked different then Eirin remembered, and not just because she was carrying several deadly magical weapons and a sword. There was a deadly air around the woman.

"Never expected you to get in a bind like that," Marisa said causally. "How'd that bitch get past your normal tricks?"

"She's not dead," Eirin replied. "She drank a Hourai elixir prototype. She can't be killed, only knocked out. And she can unweave spells instantly."

"Like this," spat Suri as she crashed out of the bamboo. Her clothes were smoldering and charred, but the pistol she fired worked just fine. Marisa pointed her hakkero at Suri, but nothing happened. Eirin could only curse in impotent frustration as the beam cut towards Marisa.

Then it shattered against a light blue shield that appeared out of nowhere. All three of the women paused in surprise, as a helpful voice from one of the devices on Marisa's belt said "Automatic defense screen has activated."

Eirin looked up at Marisa, relief tugging her mouth upward into a smile. "So *you* stole the prototype. I'd been wondering about that."

Marisa just shrugged and smirked. The good humor faded away when she looked back at the Lunarian. "That's an impressive power you have there. But you can't cancel this spell." Marisa drew the old sword with her off hand, then pointed her hakkero at Suri. "I designed this to take out someone who'd taken the Hourai elixir. You'll be a good test case."

"Ha!" Suri's face twisted into a sneer. "Try any spell you want human! There's no magic that can resist my power."

Marisa nodded then twisted her hand on the hakkero, The octagonal device clicked, then flipped open and a swirling ball of flame flew out. Eirin's eyes opened in shock as she realized what Marisa was doing. "Of course…"

Suri barked out another laugh and raised her hand to cancel the fireball. The flames seemed to disappear. She raised her hand to counterattack, then screamed as the invisible wind currents slammed into her and caught her in a spinning vortex of air. Her screams grew louder as the flames that had vanished reformed, then expanded to consume her. Eirin winced as the cries reached a fever pitch, before dying down to nothingness.

Eirin shouldered her bow and began resetting her defenses as the conflagration that had been Suri started shrinking under the control of the wind. "Very impressive Marisa, using the Kusanagi blade to control the winds that bind the eternal flame of the hakkero." The flames slowly formed into a tiny ball, then the winds drew it back into Marisa's mini-hakkero. "You do realize though that she'll technically be alive for the rest of her normal lifespan while in there."

"Sucks to be her," Marisa said coldly as she shut the artifact with a click.

Eirin didn't press the matter.

Marisa resheathed her blade. "I don't suppose you know where the general leading this bullshit invasion is, Eirin?"

"Actually I do. He was rather lax about hiding his arrival." Eirin didn't mention that no youkai would have the technology needed to pull off such a feat anyway. "I was going to pay him a visit when Suri interrupted me. Should I take you there as well."

Marisa's eyes narrowed. "Yeah. I got something to say to him."

The two began recasting their defensive spells. They needed to be ready for their next battle.

Shou's heart sank as she flew towards where she knew Ran was. Every now and then she saw a flash of light from another battle, or worse saw the bodies left behind. Once she saw the robes that indicated a Lunarian had fallen there, but it was mostly the corpses of youkai that littered the ground. Most youkai were on the level of Nazrin or Kyouko at best. They just didn't have enough power to face a Lunarian head on.

She wanted to stop and hunt down those responsible for this destruction, but she knew that she could save more people by taking out the head of this invasion. And Ran, hopefully, was leading her there. The kitsune wasn't really faithful at all, but her desire for backup was enough that a god like Bishamonten, like Shou, could follow it easily.

Suddenly there was a flash from just in front of her. Shou hesitated for a second, then flew down towards the disturbance. She couldn't spend time hunting down Lunarians, but she wouldn't let them commit murder right in front of her. She sent a bolt of lightning from the sky to announce her displeasure then swooped in.

As she dropped into the clearing she heard the youkai she was saving rush into the bushes, but her attention was mainly on the man in front of her. She peered at his soul before proclaiming, "Xiang-Tsu, I Vaiśravana demand you cease this random cruelty and submit to judgment."

The man looked up at her in stunned incomprehension for a moment before suddenly smiling. "Oh, a youkai worthy of my abilities. Let's see how long you keep up your illusions of grandeur after I steal your powers."

Shou's reply was cut off by a horrible wrenching sensation. The world suddenly felt wrong, like the blood had rushed from her head. The man laughed triumphantly as she tried to shake off the dizziness. "Ha! You really are powerful! Or at least, were powerful." He raised his hand to the sky. "Let's see why you dared call yourself a god."

Shou sighed. "Great, Nazrin's never going to let me down for this. A week in and I get half my god powers stolen." Still, she had both faith and the accouterments of her station. And she knew the powers that her foe now held better then any other.

She slammed her spear into the ground and jumped back. The divine lightning slammed into the spear and dissipated into the ether. Shou growled at the man. "You may have stolen my godly strength, but I still have all my youkai powers."

The man looked down at her dismissively. "So? You claim I have the power of a god. How can one little Earth creature stand against that strength?"

"Two."

There was a rustling of leaves as Mokou stepped into the clearing. "Two little Earth creatures."

Shou smiled and cracked her knuckles. "It seems the tables have turned."

"Not for long!" Xiang pointed at Mokou, and a thunderbolt slammed into the woman. Shou ignored the attack and rushed in towards the Lunarian. He turned and tried to summon up an attack to blow her

away, only to be sent reeling from a fire-blast from Mokou. "You? I killed you!"

"Blame Eirin for leaving your toys around," Mokou said as she threw another fire bolt. The man managed to bat the attack away, but Shou had closed the distance. With a roar she pounced the final ten yards and brought her clawed hands down. They stuck for a second on an invisible shield, then rended the man's magical wards.

Xiang frantically swung at Shou, sending the tiger youkai sprawling. Apparently he'd gotten some of her physical strength as well. Still it wasn't enough to seriously harm her.

Mokou rushed in again as he tried to recreate his defenses. He punched the woman in the ribs hard enough to audibly crack bones. Mokou just ignored the blow and gave him a headbutt that she had to have learned from Keine. Xiang pushed Mokou away and stumbled backwards.

Shou moved in to take advantage of his weakness. With a simple grab she caught his wrist then locked his arm with her other hand while forcing him down into her knee. Whatever spells he was trying to make shattered, though Shou noted with annoyance he'd stolen some of her heartiness as well. She kneed him again, then knocked him half upright with a uppercut. "Here, Mokou." she said as she finished off with a side thrust kick.

Mokou smiled. "Right!" She caught the man in a clothesline rush as she flew towards her from the kick. Then she grabbed him by the shirt, and threw him over her shoulder again. As he sailed through the air she flew forward and kicked him into the sky. "Let's end this farce."

Shou simply concentrated into the pagoda. At her command the forces within turned into eight streams of light. Light that could bend and twist at her command. She flung the lasers up into the sky where they circled the man, then struck in sequence. As each laser struck it knocked him further into the air, until all eight were aligned

around him. Then they struck as one. The man choked and coughed up blood as the final strike hit him.

Then the area exploded as Mokou slammed into him with a flying jump kick.

Smoke obscured the figure that crashed from the sky, but the sudden return of Shou's powers left no doubt as to who the victor was. Shou moved to check on the man, but stopped worrying about the matter when she saw the smoldering figure had a broken neck. The Yamaxandu would teach him now. "Still," she muttered, "you shouldn't have underestimated my power."

Mokou landed behind her and dusted herself off. "The power to attract treasure? How did that help you? And didn't it not work when you were trying to free Byakuren? I mean the terrible trio and the Mouse found the items for you."

Shou smiled. "It worked just fine. The items came to me then went where I wanted them to. As for how it helped in this battle…" Shou plucked her spear from the ground then offered Mokou her hand. "A strong ally is the greatest treasure one can hope for on the battlefield, no?"

Mokou blinked in surprise, then laughed and shook Shou's hand. "Right!" Then her face turned grim again. "Now, if you'd be so kind, this treasure would like to be pointed towards where Ran and those two kids are going to be fighting. I have a grudge against those Lunarians."

Shou frowned but nodded. It was not her place to question Mokou's road of vengeance. Especially not tonight. She had far greater evils to combat.

Momiji took a deep breath. "The Great Tengu is dead! As per his final commandment, the tengu who slays his assassin will prove their right to become the new Great Tengu!" Then she drew her sword

and rushed forward, her fellow wolf tengu commandos joining her. It was the duty of her unit to throw themselves into danger to prevent any other Tengu from losing their lives, especially any of the other, married wolf Tengu. They would face the foe first, contest be damned.

"Come then! Prove your worth, but know failure is death!" said the man as he he drew another device from his sleeve. As he cast it down a box of light formed around him then sped out to encompass the ruins of the Great Tengu's hall. Momiji quickened her pace.

Hanako hit the light screen first and just bounced off, her growl turning into a yelp of surprise. At the same time one of the faster crow Tengu slammed into the wall from the other side. However, Kiyo passed through without incident. Seeing that Momiji just accepted whatever might come and ran on. The light wall tingled as she ran through, but there were no ill effects.

The Lunarian swordsman faced them first, despite the press of Tengu trying to get through the strange barrier. He gave them both a nod of respect as he readied his straight sword, then his hands moved in a blur. Momiji raised her shield just barely fast enough to block one of the arrows he threw.

Kiyo wasn't as lucky, her parry coming a moment late. The arrow hit her straight in the center of her chest halting her momentum. Momiji felt a pang of sorrow as the woman tried to throw her sword at the Lunarian in a final act of defiance, but he batted it away.

She expected another arrow to pierce her shield, but instead the warrior turned and released a deadly air pressure cut at one of the tengu who was trying to summon a tornado. The attack sliced right through the dust devil that had been summoned up and through the young tengu's torso.

Momiji didn't let the carnage phase her. Instead she swung her blade low, at his thighs. It would be harder for him to block the cut.

He back-flipped out of the way instead. Then he swung his blade at her neck. She countered by bringing over her shield while simultaneously cutting at his legs. His blow snapped off the arrow in her shield and dented it further before he was forced to leap away again. Momiji quickly fixed her stance while she assessed the situation.

First, the ground was terrible here, being covered with debris. Still she was a master at keeping her footing, and it looked like her opponent was similarly skilled. That wouldn't settle the battle.

Second, the barrier seemed to be keeping everyone else out. Attacks could pass through, but people couldn't. Normally this would be terrible for a lone man, because his foes could just stand back and bury him with ranged attacks. However since the Great Tengu's will meant the killer needed to be easily identified, that was out.

Third her foe, who was assessing her of course, was weaker then her, but faster. And unfortunately, from what Momiji could see, more skilled. He was wounded, but those wounds were only slowing him down slightly.

Momiji allowed herself to smile. Fortunately, as one of the tengu trusted enough to help the Great Tengu train, she was used to fighting someone faster, stronger, and more skilled then her. Here she at least had one advantage.

She decided to put that advantage to use by swinging her sword down at the warrior. She angled the attack, trying to make it a little harder to parry. It was no use. He caught the blade flat to flat, then kicked her shield to knock her backwards. She rolled with the attack, ignoring the painful shrapnel on the ground, then leaped to her feet with a stab. He knocked that aside with another kick, then attacked her shield with his sword. Momiji snarled as the metal buckled with a crunch, ruining the shield and probably fracturing her arm.

She ignored the pain and pressed forward swinging her blade in powerful strokes. He parried the first, and the second, and the third,

but when he brought his blade up to catch the fourth Momiji switched to a two handed grip on her sword and pushed forward. With a terrible screech the two blades locked. Momiji stepped forward, trying to push her foe to the floor. He lowered his stance and pushed back, using his superior positioning to resist.

"The barrier keep impure beings out."

Momiji was surprised at her foe's sudden explanation. Normally warriors didn't speak when dueling in earnest. He continued. "You are the only one," he grunted as Momiji pushed him back slightly, "who can get a clean kill." Momiji was surprised to find deep respect in the Lunarian's eyes.

Which meant when the flicker of respect turned to regret, she immediately brought her shield up to protect her face. Pain flared through her arm as the throwing arrow slammed through the shield and limb behind. She swung blindly to protect herself, but she didn't hit. Another blow slammed into her shield, then another that caused her shield to completely cave in. Momiji leaped back as far as she could, landing awkwardly on a piece of the building support.

She looked to her opponent just in time to see an errant wind blast heading straight for her. She rolled to the side quickly as the mini tornado roared past and peppered her with debris. She muttered a curse as a scream from behind told her someone else along the firing path wasn't as lucky.

The Lunarian of course was unharmed. Anyone stupid enough to throw a spell at him while other tengu were backstopping the attack was too stupid to hit him. He was currently causing more chaos by throwing arrows and air pressure blasts into the crowd of tengu. Momiji heard some of the older clan leaders trying to get some semblance of order together, but that would take time.

She would have to buy that time.

Momiji snarled as she cut off her shield, taking the arrow's tail and a few layers of skin with it. She wrenched out the arrow head from the other side of her arm, then quickly lashed her hand to the sword. It'd be painful, but she could ignore that.

Her preparations complete, she charged.

To her relief no one was stupid enough to throw something at the man when she got close enough. Sadly that meant he had plenty of time to spin and toss another one of those damned arrows at her. She used the flat of her blade to block, and continued to close. She lashed out quickly with another driving cut and he slapped it over his head with a ring of steel.

Momiji had been expecting that. She let the slap give her the momentum she needed to start her blade spinning in her hands. With a howl she continued stepping forward, keeping the blade spinning with all her might. The Lunarian tried to parry and nearly got his sword batted out of his hands. He retreated against Momiji's pressing assault, getting a cut on the cheek as he did.

Momiji kept pressing him, further and further. Each step brought him closer to the barrier, and once he was outside the battle was won. She just needed a few more meters.

Then her foe lunged forward and slapped at her blade. Normally she would have ignored the attack, but her weak left hand failed her. The blow sent her sword far out of line. Once again pain swept through her body as her foe's sword plunged into her thigh.

Momiji forced her body to fly backwards, even though the movement ripped the wound wider as the sword was pulled out. Her foe charged in at her, but she managed to throw her blade at him with her right hand. The blow was weak, but it was still enough to bowl him over when he tried to block.

Momiji whispered an incantation and the winds caught her blade and brought it back to her. A clever tengu tried to arc a rock onto the

man, but he recovered and rolled aside long before it hit.

As she tried to stand, Momiji realized she was in trouble. Without the power in her legs she couldn't effectively strike her foe. And she was slowly coming to realize it was going to take hours for the now leaderless Tengu to find a good solution to the Lunarian's barrier and the Great Tengu's will. She was the only person who could buy that time. And she needed to be able to fight to do that!

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Desperate times…

I know I'm not a faithful person, but I believe you want to protect the mountain as well. All I ask of you is the strength to defend my people long enough for someone to overcome this foe.

She was pleased, if not surprised, when she felt strength returning to her limbs. Kanako was very trustworthy in some areas.

Her eyes opened in shock when a hand patted her on the head. "I knew you'd come through for me, Inubashiri." Kanako stood over her in full battle regalia, war fan in one hand, sword in the other. Silence fell over the battlefield, as the Tengu and the Lunarian both stood in shock. "A war goddess like me can't refuse the heartfelt request of a soldier who seeks no personal gain after all." She faced off against the Lunarian. "Noble warrior who asks for my power, I shall aid you in this fight!"

Momiji's heart lifted. Things had shifted in the Tengu's favor. She brought herself to her feet and started lashing her arm and hand more securely to her sword.

Meanwhile Kanako rushed the Lunarian.

Swordfights were very different when you were an observer instead of a participant. From here she could view the grace of each fighter much more objectively. Kanako's swordplay was surprising awkward looking, but her tessen danced like a steel butterfly. Momiji

recognized it as a general's style, one designed to tire opponents while reinforcements arrived.

The Lunarian's style was a killer's style. Every attack was designed to bring someone closer to death. Even his parries were designed only because his death would keep him from killing his next target. For a brief moment Momiji wished she could learn this beautiful style.

She shook those thoughts away. Obviously the pain was distracting her. She finished tying her makeshift splint and sword grip, then stalked towards the battle, circling while looking for the proper place to strike.

When she was almost behind him he lashed out suddenly, slapping Kanako's blade aside. His follow up strike cracked the goddess's helmet before she slammed her fan into his blade, trapping the weapon between the tines. Momiji rushed forward slashing across his body. In a feat of strength he ripped both his blade and the fan free of Kanako's grip and brought it up to block. The fan shattered as Momiji's blade hit it, and one of the tines flew into the man's shoulder at least five centimeters, but his block still held.

Momiji was forced back as he brought his off hand up and tossed a bag of what she could only assume was poison dust between them. He then swung at Kanako again. Sparks flew as the goddess parried with her armguard while stabbing with her own blade. He ducked to the side, earning a slice across the shoulder. Kanako tried to follow up with a slash but he suddenly changed his stance and caught the goddess in a rolling throw.

Momiji ran forward to strike him while he was down. But he swept up one of the small metal statues that had littered the room, and pain exploded in her head. She forced herself to fly backwards as steel clashed again in front of her. When she recovered from her minor concussion she found Kanako retreating to her side with a split shoulder pad, while their foe was setting his notched blade for another round.

And with that she knew what she needed to do. She saw a path to victory, even if it was slight, and she would take it. After a few deep breaths to steady herself, she raised her blade. The edge was to the sky, and her right hand supported the weapon on it's dull edge. "Yagyu, Floating Boat."

Kanako stiffened beside her and Momiji smiled slightly. Apparently the goddess knew the Yagyu sword catcher style as well. Good, that would make things better. Opposite them, the Lunarian's eyes narrowed, and he nodded.

Momiji took in another breath, then let it out in a powerful howl as she charged.

The Lunarian saw the technique's trap immediately of course. If he parried the blow, he'd be bull rushed and killed as he fell. If he took advantage of the weak points in her defense, his sword would be trapped in her body. The only way to stop the attack was blade to blade. He saw this and stepped forward to meet the challenge.

As the two swords flashed towards each other, a vine snaked from behind Momiji and looped around the notched part of the Lunarian's sword.

Momiji's Tengu forged sword shattered like glass against the Lunarian forged blade. But as it did, there was a dull snap, and the Lunarian's straight blade flew off having been rusted right though.

As the two warriors continued moving forward, Momiji opened her mouth, bared her fangs, and ripped the man's throat out.

The Lunarian assassin's life blood poured out, but his body whirled around and pointed the haft of the blade at Momiji. As the last drop of blood spurted out, he forced himself to take a single step. Then the man's eyes clouded, and he slowly collapsed forward. The final strike of a warrior performing his duties. Serving even to the point of death.

The barrier shimmered, then faded away. As it did the assembled Tengu slowly descended to the ground.

Hanako's voice rang out, strong and clear. "The assassin has been slain! Momiji Inubashiri is the Great Tengu, by right of combat. Do any question her victory?"

Momiji started at the words, then she forced herself to stand tall and proud. She wasn't sure how she could lead the Tengu. A wolf tengu had never been the great Tengu before. She was unmarried, with no political connections or clout. And to be honest all she knew of politics she'd learned while standing guard. But she would have to rule at least for today, in order to save her people.

A commanding voice cut through the air. "Momiji Inubashiri, Great Tengu." Momiji turned at Kanako's words. "Kneel before me."

Momiji heard the rustling of feathers at those words. She knew that showing fealty to anyone, even a god, was dangerous right now. The Tengu were proud. They wouldn't be slaves again.

Still, Momiji had faith that Kanako knew what she was doing. She stepped forward and knelt.

Kanako's voice cut through the rising whispers that Momiji's actions had started. "This world has been plunged into darkness and barbarism. The Emperor is lost, and the line of succession has been severed. The cities of the world lie in ruin, and without the aid of a strong force, famine and chaos will sweep over our beloved isles."

"Thus in the name of the gods of Japan, I hereby proclaim Momiji Inubashiri, ruler of the greatest nation still existing, to be Shogun of Japan." Momiji's heart skipped a beat at the proclamation, and she looked at Kanako in shock. The goddess simply smiled as the whispering grew louder and more excited. "I give you our blessing, and command you to bring the enlightened rule of the gods once more to the islands of Japan. May you rule wisely and well, until the great Amaterasu blesses us with an Emperor once more."

Kanako carefully removed her katana from her belt, then bowed and presented it. "We give you our sword to serve this cause."

Still shocked Momiji stood and took the weapon, marveling at the balance. Then she unsheathed it and held it up to the sky. "Tengu prepare yourselves! It is time we brought war to those who dared attack us!"

The roar of approval at her words washed away the last worries in Momiji's heart. She could lead them, she could protect them. At least for today.

She pointed her blade at the leaders of the various Tengu houses in turn. "I want every warrior to form units of at least eight. No Tengu is to try to fight a Lunarian alone. We want many fast victories, not drawn out battles that will damage the land. Scouts are to rouse our Kappa allies first and call in any favors we may have, then split up and join warrior bands. Three to a band seems reasonable."

"What about our homes and families?" One of the house leaders asked.

Momiji nodded. "We will clean up Youkai Mountain before pressing our attack into Gensoukyo, so we should get rid of most opposition. However the goddesses and I will stand guard as well. If any of you face a strong counterattack, retreat and send scouts so we can stabilize our front."

"As you command Great Tengu."

Momiji nodded as the Tengu began putting her plan into action. She looked over as Kanako glided in beside her, "Were you planning this?" Momiji asked the goddess quietly.

"No," Kanako said with a smile. "At least not past the part where you summoned me. But I'm pleased at how things turned out none the less."

Momiji considered pressing the matter but Hanako's approach forced her to change her attention. "Shall I see to your wounds Great Tengu?"

Momiji winced. "My personal guard can call me Momiji, Hanako. And please do. We might need to take up arms again tonight."

Her mind wandered as Hanako started treatment. Probably to avoid having to think about the pain as Hanako broke and reset her arm. She wondered about the Lunarian's words. Had she really crossed the barrier because she was pure? And now that she was trapped in the path of the leader, was her soul still pure?

Momiji shrugged and tossed the thoughts aside. In the end, she could only do her duty.

Chapter 9

The best laid schemes of mice and men…

Tenshou forced himself not to pull out his clock and check it again. He knew what time it was, and he knew when the event was supposed to occur. Fussing with his timepiece would only distract him. He needed to be in control when the moment arrived.

He allowed himself to look over the preparations instead. Nashina had set up her technomagical devices, while the other members of his guard appeared to have their wards ready. The more advanced devices were also warmed up. While Lunarians disliked purely robotic servants, their technology was advanced enough to make them. And in this case it was better then worrying about the loyalty of rabbits, or wasting precious manpower.

He was somewhat worried that only two of his scouts had survived the fights needed to draw his target in. Still he had planned for them to be expendable. He'd consulted his power several times to find out exactly who he needed to have in order to kill Yukari Yakumo. And then he made sure to add some guards on top of that. It had cost him a bit of attack power in other battle fields, but it was worth it.

Anything to destroy that woman's existence.

A mental chime range three times, and Tenshou smiled. He turned towards where the 'sound' had come from. They had arrived.

Tenshou's smile froze as another chime sounded twice. Then two more times. He hadn't been expecting this.

He took a deep breath and held up a hand to steady his followers. "Don't worry. This was accounted for by my abilities. We have enough people." Which was true. His ability prepared him for what was going to happen. Not what he expected to happen.

Sadly his heart wasn't completely mollified. He did his best to stand so he could view all the approaching enemies.

The first three were the host body and the servant, along with the host's companion. Ran Yakumo was alert and ready for battle, but the other two looked like they were barely able to fly. Excellent. He forced himself to wait for the other two groups to arrive before giving his speech.

To his surprise the host spoke first. "You. You're the murder. The one who murdered a world."

He sniffed. He was expecting something better from her host. "As if the life of a human means anything," Nashina replied.

Tenshou's blood cooled when he heard the next voice. "Even before Maribel here changed the rules a humans life still had some small meaning," Eirin Yagokoro said calmly as she strode into the clearing. The woman beside her frowned deeply, but Tenshou could see the hate in her eyes was directed at him and his followers.

The first group seemed heartened by their allies' arrival. Tenshou thought now was the time to speak. "But when weighed against a Lunarian's life it is still nothing. If mankind must die so that our people can live, that is the proper way of the universe."

The blond woman opened her mouth to retort, but a peal of thunder ripped the words into nothingness as it slammed through the clearing. Tenshou felt fear spike through him as the youkai who claimed to be a goddess and the damned immortal strode into the clearing opposite Eirin's group. The tiger woman's voice sounded like an echo of the thunder. "Then you should bear no ill will if beings greater then Lunarians must destroy your society to live."

For a moment Tenshou hesitated. This wasn't just beyond his expectations, this should be impossible. Eirin slipping past his army was reasonable. She was Eirin. But the immortal should have been sealed away! And there was no way this fake goddess should have

been able to get here from her temple so quickly. Had he made a mistake somewhere?

He consulted his power once again. Who needed to be where to make certain Yukari Yakumo would be destroyed forever?

He sighed in relief as the answer returned to him. He had all the forces he needed and more. A smile slowly slipped onto his face. "Well. This is unexpected, but in the end it might be better this way. You all can be witnesses to the final death of Yukari Yakumo."

The black haired girl next to the host glared up at him. "You crazy son of a bitch! Maribel isn't Yukari! Your whole stupid invasion has been over nothing!"

The host looked down. "Right. I'm… not Yukari… ?"

Her friend hesitated. "Mary?"

Tenshou felt the atmosphere change as everyone turned towards the host. His fists clenched. Now was the time!

"You are the host that will lead Yukari back to this world. Her soul, her memories are locked within you. When midnight arrives she will have the power to shunt aside your pathetic will, and return to life." The woman shuddered at his words.

"Bullshit," the immortal yelled. "Yukari was a bitch, but she never would have created a personality just to destroy it later. She'd have just come back as herself, not strung poor Mary along with a fake life! You're just making more lies to justify your crimes."

He smiled at the immortals words. "Hah. Perhaps there was some semblance of morality in that murderous bitch. Perhaps this was a self fulfilling prophecy, and only her host's immanent demise summoned the youkai hag from her slumber. But that doesn't matter to me. All I desire is her death!"

He turned to the host. "But perhaps you'd like to explain the matter yourself Yukari Yakumo? Shall we chat before I kill you?"

"You want to chat with Yukari?" The blonde woman's voice cut through the clearing like a knife. "Fine." She looked up, her eyes blazing with golden light. "We'll talk."

Even though he'd predicted it perfectly, Tenshou found he could only stare as Yukari Yakumo stood before him again.

"Mary?" her human companion asked as she tentatively stepped backwards. Beside the human Ran shivered and tried to shrink away at the sound of her old master's voice. From his side he heard one of the magicians swear in astonishment.

Yukari ignored them all. "So… it's been a long time. How have you been? I've been really busy being dead. You know, since you murdered me." Tenshou's rage flared as she giggled. She was treating this like a joke again! "Look. We've both said a lot of things you're going to regret. But I think-"

"Enough of your games!" he snapped. He pointed at his hated enemy. "Once again you've fallen into my trap! I predicted your movements perfectly, my allies have sealed your powers, and while there are a few obstacles I didn't predict," he waved his hand dismissively at the traitor Eirin and the youkai that accompanied her, "You know as well as I, that I must have the forces to defeat them! My plans have worked flawlessly!"

Yukari sighed. "I know. That's what makes it all so pathetically sad." She pointed towards the sky. "Now watch as *my* master plan finally unfolds."

The great watcher Acala, leaned forward. Perhaps wishing to see what the youkai sage's plans were, perhaps wondering if that truly was the youkai sage. Truthfully, it didn't matter why.

The dragon finally struck.

Acala started at the sudden attack, but it was too late. His mighty fangs sunk into the watcher's neck and latched on. The mighty god struck at the dragon's flanks to try to push the beast off, but he wrapped around the god's body and started clawing at the divine spirit.

Acala tumbled from his perch, searching for a way to break free, and the stars trembled as they wrestled.

Tenshou stared in horror as the Big Dipper moved from it's place in the sky to strike the North Star. He heard Ran whimpering in fear and awe, while his allies alternatively gasped cursed and prayed. Eirin was simply muttering, "I should have seen it…" over and over.

A harsh laugh from Yukari cut through everyone's thoughts. "Behold, the age of humanity is over! The celestial dragon is killing Acala, the god that suppresses the dark powers of the youkai! And with his presence gone, we are no longer slaves to human thought. The age of youkai has begun!"

"Damn you!" Tenshou turned his gaze back to the hateful youkai. "I can still kill you here! Nashina's machines have sealed away your powers, and-"

"Ahahahaha," Yukari waved her hand dismissively. "Do you think anything that happens here matters now? Even if you kill me, the youkai that are still alive will be stronger then ever."

"But I want to tell you boy. The Watatsukis almost beat me." Her smile widened. "I figured a massive war involving youkai would be required to draw the attention of a god, but it needed to take place on Earth. Which is why I worked so hard to make sure the Lunar war was unfinished. But those two never pressed the matter. If the moon had remained peaceful all my plans would have come to naught."

Tenshou was trembling. She couldn't be insinuating…

"That's right. I started a war with the moon, wiped out half the youkai in existence, assassinated your father, arranged my own death, and set the stage for this bloody, terrible war that's already killed billions. And it was all just a diversion!"

Tenshou's face twisted in horror and shock at how badly they'd all been used. "You monster."

There was a peal of thunder, as the fury of the god's battle struck the earth. Yukari raised her hands to the skies and laughed wildly.

And the heavens began to rain blood.

Kanon winced as the first drops of rain hit her. For some reason the liquid burned. Orin must have noticed something too, because the kassha froze in place, sniffing the air.

She tried to brush the rain off her hands, then froze when she touched the warm sticky liquid. She looked down. Her hands were streaked with crimson.

Kanon screamed.

There was another drop. Then another. Her hands were becoming stained crimson again. Just like when she'd killed murdered that bad woman.

She'd been cursed.

Orin slammed her to the ground and pulled the wheelbarrow over them. She was yelling something about staying out of the rain. But that wouldn't help would it? She'd murdered someone and they'd cursed her.

The ground seemed to waver and shimmer before her. She felt hot, like she had a fever. What was the spell to break a curse? Did she need a gohei for that, or was it the sacred wood? She tried to remember what her mother had taught her about curses, but when she thought about her mother all she could see was the burning shrine, and the blood, all the blood, rivers of blood reaching for her, trying to get into her soul. Slowly seeping under the wheelbarrow's edge, calling to her, calling for vengeance…

She screamed in fear again, then fell silent as she felt Orin pull her closer. The kitty that had played with her all those years. Her only companion other then mother. The woman who had saved her when her world had gone up in flames. She spun around and clung to the kassha for protection. From the blood. From the fear. From the pain and the loss.

Her senses seemed to dim again. Orin was the only thing she could sense in the world.

She wondered if she was succumbing to the curse. If she was going to die.

That wasn't fair though! The woman had killed her mother! Why should she be punished?

She wished she could be like the kassha. Like Aunt Ran. Strong, so strong that no curse could touch her. Strong enough so that she could live. Live on for the sake of her mother.

Her body felt very hot again, then it cooled. She could see Orin holding her tight, as well as feel it. Her ears twitched as she heard the blood banging against the cart they were hiding beneath. She felt Orin's hot breath as the woman gasped in surprise. Kanon's tails twitched as she saw the kassha's gaze cycle through shock, despair, guilt, then determination.

Orin leaned back and gently petted her as the rain continued. "Oh little kitten, I hope you knew what you were doing…" The mother

kassha hugged Kanon's new cat body again. "But I swear to you, Auntie Orin will look after you, no matter what. I promise you that. And I've never broken a promise."

Kanon mewed in assent, and let herself fall asleep in the older woman's embrace.

Keine was glad she'd had the foresight to hide the farmlands as well as the village. The crimson rain pouring down was awakening and enhancing the power of any youkai it touched, and it was granting youkai powers to those that didn't possess them. If the villagers hadn't been hidden away, almost everyone outside would have been turned into youkai.

Of course, she could probably have fixed that mistake even if she hadn't been as thorough earlier.

Her gaze flickered between the massive scrolls that circled around her. In truth she didn't need to read the words. The blood raining from the sky was more potent then even the moon's light. With that power flowing through her she merely needed to concentrate on an event to see it unfold before her.

And with the flick of a brush she could change it.

It was easy really. A left instead of a right brought a certain kassha to the surface just a little bit faster. A single breath of air kept an inugami from being surprised. She guided a firefly youkai to aid a struggling earth spider, and sent a flicker of pride that caused a woman to foolishly challenge a messenger of the Dragon Palace. Little changes that cascaded into bigger ones. A barrel of lost nails, that turned an advantageous position into a one sided rout.

But there were still so many she couldn't save.

Her eyes flickered down to Mystia's body. She could save her at least. Make her accept the offer. It wouldn't be a big change. No one

would even know.

But Keine couldn't do that to her. Mystia had chosen her own path. And now that her own youkai blood was boiling with power, Keine understood the night sparrow's choice a little.

And perhaps, in this new era, youkai would need heroes as well.

Thud-thump *Thud-thump* The beat throbbed through her skull. *Thud-thump* *Thud-thump*

Each beat of her heart brought purest agony to Renko's mind. She couldn't see anything other then a crimson-black haze that pulsed in time with the pain. Her ears recognized other sounds, but none of them were as immediate as the sound of her blood.

"Why do you resist, human?"

Renko's mind reached out towards the voice, the only thing that wasn't a source of pain. Then she forced herself to stop. "Who are you?"

"I am the blood within you. The blood that has mixed with yours. You have been covered in the blood of a god, and it is making you into a greater being." The voice seemed to wrap around her, muting the pounding of her heart. "Rather, it has made you into a greater being. You are the one hurting yourself fighting it. Let us become one, and you shall have all the power you need to save your friend."

"Mary?" Renko's mind tried to pull away from the voice's embrace only to be met with another pulse of agony. But she remembered the last few moments before she'd been suffused in the rain of blood. "Mary! What happened to her? I have to help her before she hurts herself."

The voice seemed to whisper directly into her ear, "You will be fighting the Youkai sage herself to do that. You will need power equal

to a youkai's to have any chance. Accept me, and I can give you that power."

"And what do you ask in return?" Renko asked. "What price do you demand?"

"I ask no price. Why should I make demands of myself? All that I ask is you accept that you are a true magician now."

Renko frowned. "So you want my humanity."

"I cannot take your humanity," the voice replied apologetically. "You bathed in the blood of a god. You can't remain a pure human after that. All you can do is accept your fate."

Renko hesitated, then cringed as the pain returned. The voice sighed. "I have told you no lies. You must accept this truth, or you will die."

"Told me no lies…" Pain surged through Renko's head again, but she pushed through it. "But you've been dodging the truth too haven't you!"

The voice fell silent, but the pain faded as well.

"We humans were formed from the blood and tears of the gods. A little more or less shouldn't change anything." The red haze in front of Renko's eyes parted, revealing her hidden tempter. "It's the dragon's blood that's trying to transform me! Isn't it?"

The shadow of the dragon occupying her mind nodded. "Yes. Still, I have said no lies. In the end you must choose my path, or the path of death."

"I choose the path that all humans must face," Renko replied evenly.

The dragon stood silently, then laughed. "Well fought human." It coiled in upon itself slowly shrinking as it spun around and around. "I honor your willpower. Your path is once again fully your own to

decide. I even grant you a tiny fraction of my power, to use as you like." The dragon shrank and shrank, until it finally vanished.

As Renko's eyes cleared she heard the dragon's soft voice say, "If you ever need the rest, you know how to contact me, magician."

Chapter 10

A massive explosion rang through Renko's ears. She quickly tossed up an umbrella spell and wiped the blood from her eyes. The sticky fluid was hard to get off, but fortunately it hadn't had time to dry. She opened her eyes, and was stunned by the chaos.

Space was rent open throughout the clearing, as dozens of Maribel's strange gaps hung randomly about. Throughout them Lunarians and youkai - and Lunarians turned youkai - swooped and danced, each firing off deadly spells. She watched Marisa chase a Lunarian who had spouted angelic wings through a portal and end up crashing into Shou, while her angel winged foe found herself flying out a different portal into a crossfire between Eirin and some Lunarian defense system.

And right in front of her was Maribel, laughing madly at the chaos in a voice that wasn't her own, while the Lunarian leader stared down in fear and hatred.

"Oh 'Lord' Tenshou, just so you know, you were right about this being a self fulfilling prophecy. I'd have never returned if you hadn't attacked the humans." Maribel sidestepped an errant bolt from the melee before continuing. "Oh, and another thing I should thank you for. Now that humanity's civilization is mostly gone it'll be much easier to set up the youkai nation. If you hadn't killed so many people needlessly we youkai would have had to integrate with society slowly. That would have been quite difficult."

"Shut up!" The man's composure finally snapped and he drew some kind of gun. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" he yelled as he fired.

Maribel hopped lightly out of the way of the attacks. "What are you so mad about? It's not like your petty obsession with revenge led you to destroy your nation, your world and your race, while empowering

everything you hate. Oh wait. Sorry that is exactly what happened, isn't it?"

Something was wrong with Mary. Something was dreadfully wrong. But Renko couldn't deal with it until the battle was won. She had to finish this quickly.

First she tossed up an umbrella spell over where Maribel was. Mary had been using some boundary trick to dodge the rain, but Renko didn't want to know what would happen if she stopped. Then she flipped out her Hakkero and fired a laser right at Tenshou.

The shot reflected off his shield into space. Renko swore. She didn't have enough power to defend and attack at the same time.

A feeling of danger made Renko leap forward. The ground behind her exploded with a sharp crack as several ice bolts impacted behind her. The transformed Lunarian with angel wings fired a few more blasts at Renko, forcing her to jump away.

The woman turned her attention to the main fight. "My Lord! The devices are still partially working. I can still help you!" The desperation in the woman's voice tore Renko's heart up. The disdain that covered Tenshou's face at the sight of his transformed friend only made it more pathetic.

Ran spun out of nowhere and slammed into the woman. The two tumbled to the side in a mad grapple. Tenshou didn't even spare them a glance before firing at Maribel again. This time Maribel just held out her hand and a octagonal border blocked the attack. Renko started to feel like she was outclassed by everyone in this fight.

"You're rather quick to abandon your allies aren't you?" Mary taunted again. "Did you care about any of the people you've sent to their deaths? Do you care about any of the people here? Or are they just pawns for your advancement?"

Tenshou started charging a magical shot. "Shut up beast! You don't seem to give a damn about your minion either!"

"Ran can take care of herself."

Renko could see Tenshou was about to release his magical attack. She called upon her training and reached out. The magic was odd, mixing magical lines and binary. But with her limited coding experience from college and Patchouli's training she understood enough of it. She wormed past the binary and ripped the heart out of the spell.

The magic fizzled as he threw it.

Her reward was a wave of exhaustion. Renko forced herself to start moving, but Tenshou managed to snap off three shots at her. She started to reform her wards when a tombstone fell out of nowhere and absorbed the blasts. Renko made a mental note to thank Mary and hid behind the gravestone's cover. From there she surveyed the battlefield.

The main fight was pure chaos. Shou and her opponent were only visible as blurs of light that occasionally clashed. One of the robots was letting out blinding fireworks and electrical shorts as it slowly died. Eirin was on the ground with a small smoking hole in her chest. Marisa was leaning over Eirin and casting some sort of spell on her, but the magician was missing a foot. Chen and another girl were fighting another Lunarian and - wait, when the hell did they get here?

The only thing that made any sense was Ran's battle, where the kitsune was slowly crushing the woman she'd intercepted to death. Renko had wondered why the analytical youkai used such a brutal style. Now she understood. Ran was simply eliminating all the unnecessary variables from the fight.

Renko glanced back at Maribel. Her friend was easily dodging the Lunarian's attacks, though Tenshou looked like he was recovering from his blind rage. Renko needed to find some way to tip the

scales. Then she recalled the Lunarian woman's words before Ran took her down.

Looking back at the battle she saw them. Three machines that weren't contributing to the fight. Renko lined up a shot at one and tossed her biggest star bullet at it.

The machine exploded. Then a lance of energy flew out and blew the tombstone Renko was hiding behind to pieces. The impact sent Renko tumbling as her wards tried to compensate. As she picked herself off the ground she wondered if Eirin had tried something similar and gotten caught by the trap.

Well hopefully the trap was stupid. Renko summoned up a magical familiar and sent it off. The magical circle skittered through the air between the two towers, then exploded into a stream of bullets that attacked one of them. In a flash the machine retaliated and struck the other tower. The resulting string of counterattacks turned both of them into rubble.

Renko started as a wave of power rolled over her. She turned back to Maribel's fight.

Tenshou unleashed another futile barrage into the octagonal barrier Mary had somehow managed to conjure. Maribel's expression twisted into an alien smirk as the attack ended. "It's amusing. You actually had a chance you know. Even after all your stupid leaps of logic and poor decisions, you still had a chance. If Renko hadn't thought to shatter those devices that were chaining my full abilities one of your allies might have been able to get a lucky shot in. If you hadn't doubted your own powers those extra forces of yours might have stopped one of my allies from interrupting our battle."

Mary pointed at the man. "But the time for what ifs has passed. Die."

Gaps opened above and below Lord Tenshou and immediately began vacuuming up everything in the area. The suction dragged

Renko three feet before she got a good grip on the ground. Debris started flying as the forming whirlwind started to howl.

And Tenshou's screams were sucked into the void as the winds started tearing him apart.

"Mary!" Renko called out to her friend, but the wind swallowed her words.

As Tenshou spasmed Maribel continued. "Oh right. I'm not sure which gap your soul will be sucked into, but don't worry. It's far far away from where the Shinigami can reach, so you won't have to spend your afterlife with any impure souls. Your own private hell, to rule over by yourself. Won't that be nice?"

The Lunarian didn't seem to respond at all. From the way his eyes had rolled Renko was certain he was unconscious or dead.

Renko forced herself step by step through the winds towards her friend. A stray rock hit her and made her stumble, but she pulled herself to her feet and continued on. Finally she managed to reach Maribel and get a hand on her shoulder. "Mary!" she screamed over the wind. "You need to stop! He's dead! It's over!"

Maribel turned towards her, eyes blazing gold. "I'm sorry Renko, but I'm Yukari now. And it's not over until he pays for his insolence."

The words stabbed into Renko like a knife. Mary was gone? No…

Renko shook her head, then hugged her friend close. Maribel stiffened at the embrace, but Renko didn't pull back.

Renko took a deep breath. "Mary. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't see how much this was hurting you. How the hatred was eating at you. I'm sorry I couldn't help you move past that." Renko squeezed Mary a little tighter before continuing, "But you can't run from this Mary. I know that it hurts. I know you don't like the part of yourself that hates, that kills, that burns for revenge."

"But I love you Mary. All of you. Even the parts of you that get angry, or even the parts that hate. Those aren't the parts that make you a monster. Those are the parts that make you human."

"I…" A shudder ran through Renko's arms. "I told you Renko. Your friend Mary is no more. I am the youkai sage."

Renko shook her head. "Even without my eyes, I can see the truth Mary. I know that's still you."

Maribel froze in Renko's arms, her eyes glazing over. The winds died and the gaps faded away. Renko closed her eyes and whispered, "Please, Mary. Come back to me."

Mary opened her eyes.

Around her the space was dark, just like the gaps that she had come to call her own. Still, it took her a while to realize where she was. The boundary of consciousness.

Before her was a woman. Their blond hair matched, as did their violet dresses, but the other woman was older. More regal and composed. She had all of Maribel's physical qualities, except she was inhumanly perfect.

Maribel knew who she was immediately.

Yukari seemed oblivious to Maribel's arrival. She simply stood in the mindspace, reading a book with no title.

"You!" Maribel winced as the shout echoed loudly, then forced herself to continue. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Yukari looked up from her book. "Me? I'm just a distant memory. One that should have faded away long ago."

The words stopped Maribel in place. This… wasn't what she was expecting. She fought off the confusion. "I want my body back."

"Good." Yukari smiled softly and closed her book. "This is your life. I'm glad to see you taking control again."

Maribel gaped at the spirit. "That's… it?"

The woman nodded her head. "You seem to think I'm Yukari. I'm not. I'm just fragmented memories, combined with what you think Yukari should be like. A shadow of the youkai sage, who you gave control to because you didn't want to become a monster."

"But," Maribel looked at the floor. Her eyes began to swim with tears. "But… I… I don't want to be a killer. I don't want to hate… to hate this much. I… I…"

"Sh…" A gentle hand patted her on the head. "I understand. It's hard for you. You aren't the type of person who can accept the need to kill." The woman sighed. "And I gave you problems too. These memories that compose me confused you. Made you question what was real."

Maribel sniffed and wiped her eyes. "I… Renko is right isn't she. You're right aren't you." She looked up at the woman. "I'm sorry for trying to make you a scapegoat for my anger."

Yukari's shadow shook her head. "It's alright. I'm part of you after all."

"Mhm," Maribel nodded weakly. She sighed, then managed a weak smile. "I made you act like a total bitch didn't I? Half of that stuff was made up too. All just because I wanted to hurt him."

"Like I said, it's all right." The woman winked. "And well, you should remember by now Yukari didn't care about looking like a total bitch."

"I suppose not." Maribel bowed to the woman. "I'm ready to accept myself now. Thank you kindly for acting on my behalf."

The woman bowed in return. "It was my pleasure." As she began to fade into the darkness she stepped forward. "Oh and Mary?"

"Eh?" Maribel blinked in surprise.

The woman placed her hat on Maribel's head. "Please watch over Gensoukyo for me."

And then she was gone.

Maribel opened her eyes to find herself in Renko's embrace. She sighed in relief then hugged the other girl in return. "Renko…"

"Mary?" Renko pulled away just enough to look Maribel in the eyes. Then the woman let out something between a laugh and a relieved sob. "Mary! You're back!"

Mary's eyes teared up again. "Yeah. I'm back." She smiled. Then then she started sobbing. She was alive! Renko was alive! It was all over, and they were both alive! There was so much she wanted to say, to do, to explain. But all that came out were sobs.

She clung to Renko for dear life as the emotions she'd tried to bottle up poured out. Renko just hushed her and held her, alternating between holding her close and patting her hat back into place as sobs wracked her body.

As the sobbing slowly stopped she saw the rain had at some point changed to water. A steady deluge that slowly washed away the blood.

Maribel buried her head in her friend's shoulder, and let the rain lull her to sleep.

Epilogue

Only the phoenix arises and does not descend. Everything Changes

And nothing is truly lost.

Maribel sighed in contentment as the tea warmed her stomach. Sipping tea in the fall was one of life's greatest pleasures.

Renko sat down on the walkway beside her, then waved to the young girl sweeping the steps. "Kuroko, that's enough for today. People expect a few leaves in the fall."

"Okay, Miss Renko," the girl replied. She flicked one last leaf down the stairway, then went to put the broom away in the shrine's storage room.

Well technically it wasn't a shrine anymore, Maribel thought as she took another sip of tea. There was no god for the Hakurei Shrine after all. But when they'd bought the land they'd rebuilt the shrine mostly the same as it had been before.

Maribel had been a little worried when Renko'd suggested they take over the shrine. But most of the youkai who had stayed in Gensoukyo had seemed perfectly happy with it. And once Kanon had shown up to insist that the Hakurei shrine should be run by humans the few hold outs caved in.

Now it served more as a tea house. A place at the boundary of the Tengu's new capitol city and the village of Gensoukyo. Between the magitech world the kappa and humans had built, and the pure magic of the wild youkai. A place where steam fairies and flower fairies could meet up and plot mischief, though Maribel was going to make them sorry if they tried anything here.

Maribel's introspection was cut of as Ran flew in over the rise. She reached through a gap and grabbed another cup of tea as the

kitsune landed and bowed. "I see you three are doing well."

"Ah hello, Miss Ran," Kuroko said. Maribel nodded her own greeting and handed Ran the tea. Ran accepted it and sat down on the shrine's back porch.

The four sat there for some time, just sipping their drinks. After a while Ran asked, "Has Kanon dropped by recently?"

"Apparently Utusho's been having problems with the generators again," Renko replied. "Kanon's been busy helping with her barrier powers."

"Ah. That's too bad. I know she said she wanted the watch them finish the radio tower," Ran nodded towards the structure that now rose above the expanding city. "I have to admit, it is impressive."

"She'll be there for the shrine consecration at least," Maribel replied. "They need three miko after all, and she's better trained then the triplets or the Kochiya."

"Oh! Can we go to the opening ceremony Miss Maribel?" Kuroko asked excitedly.

Maribel smiled. "Of course Kuroko."

"I'm still not sure why they had to make it a clone of Tokyo Tower," Renko said. "You'd think the kappa would want to create something new."

"Just because we youkai aren't bound to tradition any more doesn't mean we don't appreciate it. And it was a nice building." Ran stretched. "I imagine they'll rebuild the original in Tokyo too, though Momiji will probably focus on getting a road open for the humans first.

"Should you really be treating the shogun so familiar?" Kuroko asked.

Ran smirked. "She's not my shogun. Gensoukyo is the 'ancestral homeland of the youkai, now and forever.' Momiji was smart enough to realize this land can't be ruled by any one group. You humans might like having a government, but we youkai don't."

"Though I'm surprised by you humans," The kitsune said as she looked over the city. "This is supposed to be the age of youkai, but humans are the ones driving the expansion now. The tengu and kappa are just keeping up, really."

"It has been seven years," Renko pointed out. "People are surprisingly good at bouncing back."

"Hm… Perhaps." Ran stood. "Well I'd love to stay a bit longer but I need to talk to Alice about those Makai tourists. Do you have magic lessons at the SDM today Kuroko? I can fly you over."

"Ah, yes. Thank you." Kuroko hopped to her feet, then gave Renko and Maribel a questioning glance.

Renko smiled and nodded. "We'll pick you up for dinner. It's beef stew tonight of course."

"Great!" Kuroko's happy smile turned into a frown. "Though Patchouli said we're supposed to be going over bio magic…"

Renko chuckled. "I know it's no fun, but it's very helpful. That regeneration spell she's teaching you is the reason Eirin's still alive. That and Reisen's medical skills."

"Right, right." The young girl rolled her eyes at having to hear another 'war story.' Maribel smiled herself as their young ward followed Ran into the sky. It was a good sign that Kuroko could brush those stories off. Especially since that war was the one which had taken Kuroko's own family.

Maribel leaned against Renko and watched the wind play with the leaves. "Hey Renko, do you think Kuroko would mind if we adopted

another kid?"

Renko laughed lightly. "She's old enough that you could ask her about that you know." Maribel pouted until Renko relented. "But I did overhear her talking with the Kaenbyou kids about how it might be nice to have a sister, so I think she'd agree." Renko shifted causing Maribel to plop into her lap with a surprised squawk. "Now, when were you going to ask me about this Mary?"

Maribel frowned. "It was just a thought. You know I'd ask you before I seriously thought about it." Her further protests were silenced when Renko bent over and kissed her on the lips. Maribel relaxed and lifted herself into the kiss. When Renko finally pulled away Mary growled lightly, "You're insufferable sometimes."

"Yep!" Renko replied cheerily.

Maribel was considering how to respond when the sound of someone coming up the steps caused them both to start. She sat up as an older man in worn but very beautiful archaic robes crested the hill. Maribel wondered if he was from one of the villages or cities on the outlier areas of the tengu shogunate. While the new capitol of Japan was the most technologically advanced city in the world, places that were further away tended to actually be a lot closer to the human village in Gensoukyo. It was much easier to help the locals rebuild a preindustrial city that could survive the winter and expand later then to get a postindustrial city running all at once.

The two bowed to the man as he approached. "Welcome to the Hakurei Shrine," Maribel said. "Can we get you some tea?"

The man smiled and bowed in return. "Ah, thank you for the offer, but I'm just passing through. I need to get to the village before dark I believe."

Renko nodded at the mans words. "That's a good idea. The spellcard rules should protect you if you stick to the village and major roads, but wandering around after dark is always dangerous. Still it is

a long walk, if you want you can take a break here and Mary here could teleport you to the village later."

The man's eyes widened a little bit at that and he turned towards Maribel. "Ah, I see now." The man hesitated for a moment before bowing deeply. "Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Sareseno Watatsuki. I've come to visit my aunt in the Bamboo Forest, and my cousin in the Netherworld."

Maribel's started in surprise. "Oh!" She realized she had no idea what to say. "I… that is."

The man chuckled lightly. "You need not worry about justifying yourself to a failed poet. Besides I know the truth of events."

"I see." Maribel shook her head to clear it. She still wasn't sure what to think of the man, but she didn't sense any malice from him. Quite the opposite in fact. "Well, I can teleport you to Eientei directly if you like. It's hard to get there by foot. Do you want to take a break here or…?"

"No, but thank you. I'm very eager to meet with my family, and I wouldn't want to impose on you more then I needed to."

Maribel nodded at his words then opened one of her gaps to just outside Eientei. "This should put you by the front gates. I hope your reunion goes well."

Renko spoke up softly from her side, "You may also want to visit Muenkuza. You might be interested in talking with one of the Shinigami there."

A somber look flickered over the man's face. "I see. Perhaps I will. Thank you again." He moved towards the portal before hesitating and turning back to them. "Ah yes. I think you should have this."

He handed her a tome from his travel pouch. Maribel hesitantly took the well bound book. The title, in strong but simple letters read. 'The

Rise and Fall of the Lunar Civilization."

"I wish you two good fortune," he said as he entered the portal.

"Safe journeys," Maribel replied hastily. The boundary closed with his passing and her eyes quickly returned to the book. She felt Renko move to look over her shoulder as she opened the tome and skimmed through it.

Before her appeared stories. Tales of victory and defeat, of reason of madness, of hatred and forgiveness. But one story called to her more insistently then the others. She quickly flipped to the back. To the moment everything changed.

Ignoring Renko's surprised hum, she scoured the page looking for the answer to the one question that had plagued her since the battle. She scoured the chapter, looking over it twice, then moved on to the next section to check there.

She repeated this process five more times before sighing and giving up. Renko squeezed her shoulders as she closed the book. "What were you looking for?"

Maribel bit her lip. She didn't want to worry Renko about this. Finally she sighed. "I wanted to see if what I said was true. If that really was Yukari talking though me, or I was just lying to hurt people." She closed the book. "But it doesn't say."

"Are you still worried about the connection you have with her?" Renko asked softly.

Maribel grimaced. "I don't know. I think I just wanted to know why things turned out this way. What Yukari's plan was. And, well… I suppose I wanted to know more about the person I was. Or wasn't." She reached up to touch the hat that the shadow had given her.

She closed the book. "But I guess we can't get all the answers." She patted Renko's hand and smiled. "Anyways, we should get started

on dinner soon. Otherwise Kuroko will lean how bad you are at staying on time."

"Hey, I'm never more then a couple of minutes late!" Renko protested as they headed towards the kitchen. "You're always exaggerate these things Mary."

"I give our story to dreams, so that as long as the world lasts, it is not forgotten."

With this I end my longest work. I don't know if I'd ever want to do something like this again, but I'm very glad I did.

I wish I could think of more to say, but I fear I can no longer find the words. I'd like to thank all of your for reading. And I hope to be able to entertain you once again in the future.